Inscriptions in Stone

Kazi Shahid Ahmed

Translator

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Dedication

To all martyred Freedom Fighters

and

To my little brother, the martyred Moin

and

To Raniya, Cyrus, and Alex

An Oath

I swear that all I have written is true

I swear that all I have not published is also true

I swear that whatever is published after thirty years will also be true

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Introduction

There is hardly any precedent for writing autobiographies in Bangladesh except by literati and politicians. The book *Inscriptions in Stone* by Kazi Shahid Ahmed, the former Army officer, newspaper publisher, editor, and industrialist, is therefore a little unusual. This book is noteworthy for several reasons as the author has unhesitatingly portrayed his own experiences in the British, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi periods, in his own style.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed is a workaholic and the number of institutions he has established is incomparable. In this autobiography, he has presented his work and personal life in simple, lucid, and straight-forward language. This presentation of his experiences is, however, not only the story of his or his family's life, it is a representation of the region between the forties of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. The forties were a time of much turmoil: the Second World War, famine, and the Partition had left their mark on this region of ours. With this as his background, Kazi Shahid Ahmed has narrated to us in *Inscriptions in Stone* the story of his childhood in very touching terms. This book also clearly depicts his life as a student and working adult during the Partition and afterwards, in East and West Pakistan.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed is adept at drawing characters and narrating events. Just as the events he witnesses are described realistically, his characters also come alive in his narration. His unique experiences during his time in the Army in West Pakistan allow him to draw faithful portraits of the characteristics of the Punjabis, the Pathans, and so on. To us, the quarter century long past relationship with West Pakistan is a historical reality, and yet, not much has been written about it except from a political or economic point of view. Many Bangladeshis were employed as government officials or served in the army in the then West Pakistan and spent quite some time there. They are witnesses of the martial law of 1958 and the war between Pakistan and India in 1965 and 1971. At that time, the future of Pakistan was directed, to a certain extent, by the outlook and behavior of the West Pakistanis towards the East Pakistanis. This backdrop has been depicted clearly only in Kazi Shahid Ahmed's *Inscriptions in Stone*. His descriptions of his life at Lahore Engineering College, Kakul Military Academy, Risalpur Military Engineering College and Azad Kashmir, and military life at Kasur are truly amazing. The horrifying account that he gives of his near-death experience as a prisoner in a bunker at the Kasur Front during the India-Pakistan war in 1971 over Bangladesh is incomparable. Kazi Shahid Ahmed's *Inscriptions in Stone* also documents the unbearable life led by the families of the Bangali officers and soldiers working in the army in West Pakistan during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 and thereafter.

Alongside the descriptions of his professional life, Kazi Shahid Ahmed, in this book, has depicted his family and personal life with great affection. It is obvious from the incidents he describes related to his parents, siblings, wife, and children that Kazi Shahid Ahmed has a deep connection with each of them and that he is a good son, and the ideal husband and father. The names stated in the dedication of the book also indicate which particular people he holds most dear in this world. Kazi Shahid Ahmed flourished both in his military and his civil life in independent Bangladesh. He is right to be proud of his roles in establishing the first military academy in Comilla and the Naval Headquarters in Dhaka because, in over the last four decades, no establishment has come close to being comparable. Through the establishment of several industries – a factory to make concrete electric poles, a jute mill, an herbal forest, a noteworthy organic tea garden with its accompaniments – Kazi Shahid Ahmed has changed the landscape of the

backward, undeveloped region of Panchagarh and improved, beyond comparison, the lives of the people there.

Inscriptions in Stone depicts the story of the change in the Panchagarh region as well as Kazi Shahid Ahmed's life as a journalist and a politician. The periodical newspaper industry in Bangladesh was revolutionized and modernized in the eighties and nineties through the publication of the weekly *Khoborer Kagoj* and the monthly *Ajker Shobbhota* with Kazi Shahid Ahmed at their helm. But for some reason, Kazi Shahid Ahmed did not flourish in politics. However, the diverse experiences he gained with regards to human nature is narrated with great candor in his autobiography.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed had created a heavenly garden in Savar that he had named "Bougainvillea." A full-sized bronze statue of Bangabandhu called "Shadhinotar Daak" (The Call for Independence) had been placed there with the historic speech of 7 March 1971 engraved on it. "Bougainvillea" was a meeting place for all individuals, regardless of which political ideology they supported. Very regrettably, it is now a part of the EPZ and has lost its glory. Little has been said of "Bougainvillea" in *Inscriptions in Stone*, possibly because it is one of the causes of deep sorrow for Kazi Shahid Ahmed.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed is a champion of education. His humanitarian frame of mind is evident in his establishment of an orphanage for female children and the Munshi Meherunnessa Academy for education in Jessore. One of the most important highlights of his life is the founding of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, a modern, private university in Dhaka. This institution is described in *Inscriptions in Stone*. This book, in short, is the account of the diverse experiences of a man who loves his work. Kazi Shahid Ahmed has not written his memoir for self-promotion – he wrote it to share the many strange experiences he has had in his life. He does not try to hide anything when he looks back into his past to highlight the important events. This is one of Kazi Shahid Ahmed's many virtues and clearly shows his courage.

I have known Kazi Shahid Ahmed very closely for the last twenty-five years and I am familiar with each of the events. I can, therefore, say without hesitation that Kazi Shahid Ahmed's *Inscriptions in Stone* is not just the account of a personal life, it is a trailblazer for a changing, tumultuous new day. I have not seen too many people with such creative powers and the will to realize those thoughts as Kazi Shahid Ahmed. This man's account of his daily life will be an example to follow and will certainly help in the creation of a new Bangladesh. Recently, he has ventured out as a novelist, which is quite surprising, but his success in this realm too is worthy of envy.

I wish Kazi Shahid Ahmed a long, healthy, and active life.

Dr. Rafiqul Islam
February 2014

O, I bow my head in obeisance at your feet

- *Rabindranath Tagore*

Chapter One: My Childhood

I was going to die at a very young age. When I was two, my second brother, Arun, and I fell very sick at the same time. My mother could not handle us both so she went with us to my maternal grandfather's, my nanabari in Poygram Kashba. But we grew gradually worse. Arun Bhai died one day in my mother's arms. He was four. He was as beautiful as a picture. Abba came from Jessore when he heard the news. He buried Arun Bhai and returned to Jessore. There was a huge storm in Jessore that night and our straw hut was blown away in the wind. Abba spent the whole night in an easy chair under the open sky. The next day, word was sent from Poygram Kashba that I was dying. Abba came once again. But instead of dying, I began to get slowly better. I had been so sick, however, that it was a while before I could stand on my own. Whoever saw me in Poygram Kashba or Jessore would exclaim, "This one lived!"

My being alive appeared to be the most unnatural thing to everyone.

It was 1942. I was born exactly two years before this in 1940 on 7 November, on the 21st of Kartik in the Bangla year of 1347, Thursday, at five in the morning. My father's name was Kazi Anisur Rahman and my grandfather was Kazi Nawabuddin Ahmed. Our home was in Kazi Para in Jessore's Puratan Kashba and was built on seven kathas of land. On the western side was a hut with a straw roof and bamboo walls, and a large mud house. There was a similar structure on the southern side, only smaller. On the eastern side was the kitchen, also made of mud, and in the north-east was the service-latrine or the toilet constructed by the municipality. Towards the inside was a small vegetable garden and on the southern side, by the roadside, a flower garden. Beside the kitchen was a small enclosed area which was never used as a bathroom, and next to this were a coconut and a jackfruit tree. Nothing to be unhappy about.

The compound of the house was more or less like this. On the eastern side lived the goateed Montu Mia with his bicycle shop while on the southern side lived a record keeper who came from the south. To the west lived an office peon who was from one end of Dhaka and to the north lived a wife-beating coolie who worked on the Mongla train.

When my friend Mohammed Nurjalal Biswas Master was one month old, he was sleeping alone on the veranda of his home. A fox grabbed him by the neck and dragged him down to the riverside intending to eat him. But his mother quickly appeared and rescued the baby Nurjalal from its clutches. You can now probably understand what kind of a place we spent our childhood in. The rest of Puratan Kashba was much the same.

Our old home still exists but the interior has changed. There are now seven bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a veranda, an office room, a hall, and a garden. The land in front was purchased to make a lawn, an office, and a garden. It has been almost eighty years since we have lived there. We also have a home in Deyapara where the kitchen is active every day as we still visit. Deyapara is a testament to our past – a simple investigation revealed the history of our family from seventeen generations ago and is about four hundred years old.

My ancestors were also residents of Deyapara in Rupdia, Jessore. The names of our seventeen generations are recorded in Deyapara and in my grandfather's book, *Shudhashar Shongroho*. My Abba was the fourth child of his father, my Dada. He was not very fair but he was very handsome to look at. The nearest school to our home was seven miles away and had to be reached by river or by a walk through the forest. So my father, like his brothers, had to be a jaigir or lodger[1] so he could study at Boshundia School. Had he not, he might have become food for some wild beast because the paths went through overgrown forests. Abba first went to school when he was eight or nine. And so did I. The home at which my father lodged had no one to teach, so he was required to do other household chores, including carrying the farmers' softened rice to the fields for their lunch. At one end of the only veranda in the house lived an old-aged close relative of the family and at the other end lived Abba. The house was in the forest and wild animals prowled freely in the dark of night. Frightening sounds produced a ghostly environment there while the light of the fireflies in the forest also contributed to its strangeness. In his fright, Abba could not tell when he would fall asleep. He was scared all the time but there was no alternative to his staying there. If he came home, Dada would beat him up and send him back. He must go to school.

One day, Abba and a cousin of his, Malek Chacha (or Malu) were returning from Rupdia to Deyapara. On the way, they came to an old shako, a thin bamboo bridge that lay over the small river. As they were about to cross, they saw a tiger on the other side, drinking from the river. Abba was thinking about what they should do when my foolish Malu Chacha, not stopping to think at all, shot up to the top of the bamboo pole of the shako. The pole broke, of course, and he flew off and fell right in front of the tiger. Malu Chacha's deed was done by the time Abba had finished thinking. The tiger ran off into the forest in fright and when Abba swam across to the other side, he found Malu Chacha laughing as he said, "Did you see, Anu, how I scared that tiger off?" Abba smiled then, relieved to find the foolish Malu alive.

The old man used to cough all night. Abba was bothered by it but knowing there was someone close by alleviated his fear a little. One night, there was no coughing, and Abba learned the next day that the old man had died. Abba was really scared because now he would have to sleep on that veranda alone. Unfortunately, there was no alternative. No matter how scared he was, he still had to stay there – in that forest, on that veranda.

I must narrate one incident here now.

One day, Haran's new wife, Khatoon, arrived. She appeared to be about fifteen. A few days later, that pretty and slim wife with the beautiful eyes called Abba to meet her secretly. She asked, "O teacher, do you go to Boshundia Haat[2]?"

Abba was young then, perhaps fourteen. He replied, "I do."

Khatoon then said, "You know, teacher, my Baajan[3] comes to sell taro, banana flower, and so on there. Baajan is taller than everyone else by an arm and a half; he is as black as night and has long hair and a

[1] Essentially a home tutor. Those who needed a place to stay near their educational institutions often boarded with locals in return for tutoring their young children.
[2] An open, temporary bazaar that set up periodically, perhaps once or twice a week.
[3] Another name used to address a father, often in villages

beard. Will you be able to find him? If you do this just once, I'll never ask you to do it again. I want to see my Baajan just once more in this life."

Abba agreed. But he was not able to locate Khatoon's Baajan. On every market day, Khatoon would stop him and, very timidly and piteously, he would tell her that he did not find him.

Even up till his dying day, Abba could not forgot that wife of Haran's because Khatoon's mother-in-law would refuse to give her food as she had not been able to bear any children. Khatoon had hanged herself when she could no longer bear the pain of hunger and not seeing her Baajan. Abba came to know of this and whenever he narrated this story to me, I listened with rapt attention and saw his eyes grow misty. Then I would massage his legs. I heard a lot of stories and truths from my father as I sat there massaging his legs. Abba would say, "Everything is a lie. Lies are all around. Seek out the truth from among them."

And I heard stories from my maternal grandmother, my nani. My nani was called Sajeda, nicknamed Saju. Her father's name was Syed Nurul Huq. He was from Kandapara in Bagerhaat. My nani's home is still standing, a huge house with a pond on seventy bighas of land. Nani was educated but when she was married into the past-loving family in Poygram Kashba, she forgot everything as she never saw the Bangla alphabet inside the compound of that huge house. She only remembered how to read and write "Taltala" because, once a year, she would pass through that station on her way to Bagerhaat. But she had a hoard of stories. She would pour out her stories whenever she found some of us siblings. My nana's name was Kazi Golam Sobhan. He fought a case over his zamindari for twenty-eight years, finally losing it and everything with it. And whatever he earned as a property dealer was stolen, after his death, by a friend of his. That man built a white two-story villa with that money in Poygram Kashba. That house still stands today.

My little sister, Hasnu, was a simple girl. On her first day of school, when she was asked what her father's name was, she replied, "The late Kazi Anisur Rahman."

The headmaster was alarmed! "When did he die? I saw him just this morning!"

Hasnu then said, "But he didn't die!"

The master then said, "But you just said 'Late'."

Hasnu replied, "When Ma says her father's name, she always says 'Late Golam Sobhan…'."

The headmaster had nothing to say then except, "I see I have my work cut out for me!"

Anyhow, Abba eventually completed his primary education life in this manner. Then he went to his middle brother and got admitted into the Jessore Zilla School. He was an excellent student, equally competent in Bangla and English. He passed his matriculation with a First Division and his Shejo Bhai then admitted him into Daulatpur College. There were only a handful of Muslim students. The rest were Hindus. Abba, however, was a favorite among them because of his writing skills. They made him the Secretary of the Literary Section. It was the time of the Swadeshi Movement.[4] So many people gave their lives then in Calcutta. There was a memorial service at Daulatpur College and Abba recited a poem he had written on

[4] The Swadeshi Movement, part of the Indian independence movement, was an economic strategy aimed at removing the British Empire from power and improving economic conditions in India by following the principles of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency), which had some success. – Wikipedia

the dead Binoy, Badol, and Dinesh. When the college closed for vacation and Abba was returning home to see his critically ill parents in Jessore, he met a man on the train who praised his poem highly and requested a copy so he could read it to others. Abba was so happy that he gave away the poem to him.

Dadi died around this time and Dada followed a few days later. Abba sat for his exams and passed his IA in the First Division. He then got admitted into Ripon College in Calcutta. My second uncle got married during this time in Poygram Kashba. Chachi was at once my mother's paternal cousin as well as maternal. This wedding led to my father's visits to Poygram Kashba. Our mother was a beauty and Abba fell in love with her. Their love remained intact until their death. My nana was a wealthy man and lived in Calcutta. He did not want his daughter to marry a poor man but he agreed after considering that the boy was from a respectable family, a good student studying at Ripon College, and the family had been rich and well-known once. But a few days before his exams in the fourth year, disaster struck. The man who had praised and taken Abba's poem at Daulatpur College was actually a government spy. After all this time, Abba was rusticated from the college for writing such a poem even though Shejo Chacha had warned him over and over again to refrain from using the word "Swadeshi." After his rustication, Abba began to look for a job. When he could not find anything and he had almost reached the age limit for getting a job, Shejo Chacha took him to see Belayet Munshi, the Superintendent of the Jessore Collectorate. Munshi Shaheb took pity on him and gave Abba a job, the job of counting money. His monthly salary was thirty-five taka. He was now being pressured to take his wife to his own home. At the same time, Shejo Chacha said, "You now have a job and a wife. You need to start supporting yourself." Then he threw Abba out of the house. Abba then bought seven kathas of land on loan for thirty-five taka, very close to Shejo Chacha's home. It was impossible for Abba to pay so much money back at once so it was arranged that he would repay the loan at the rate of five taka per month. He built a straw hut on that piece of land and brought my mother home. Ma had spent the first part of her life in Calcutta and later in a small zamindar house in Poygram Kashba but had nothing at her husband's home. And yet, we have never seen Ma and Abba be unhappy about anything in their lives.

Abba was posted at Narail at the time. My oldest brother, Boro Bhai, was still a babe in arms. Everything was cheap and available. The air was clean and sweet. The rivers flowed unwaveringly. Their home was small and they were happy, except for one thing: the lack of a young servant to do the chores. Ma would remind Abba every morning as he left for work. So one day, unable to stand the complaints any longer, Abba arrived home with a young boy in tow. Abba left the boy standing outside and called from the yard, "Dulal's Ma, I've brought you a young servant." When Ma appeared, Abba asked the boy to turn around. The "young boy" had a beard – he was a dwarf.

Abba cried, "But I couldn't find anyone else!"

Ma fell over, laughing. Abba could go to great lengths with his jokes. I heard this story from Abba himself.

The haat in Jessore met only twice a week. Abba would go there, accompanied by Boro Bhai. Later, he would take me. We had servants in front and behind us. When we did not have servants for a few days, the burden fell to me. Abba would buy everything – he loved all the good stuff. And he would eye the roe of the Baan fish, the tengra fish, and the hilsha. I would return home and help my mother out a lot. I loved hilsha and gradually, I learned how to cook. I still love cooking. My maternal uncle, Mama, would come at this time, always bringing something.

Abba registered the piece of land in Deyapara in his youngest brother's name. And from then on, he never received anything from the village. The lesson learned here is that it is better not to register away your property. Let it be. When needed, one can quickly bring it under control.

The Second World War began, followed closely by famine. People died like flies for lack of food. We were also short of food, just like everyone else. In the middle of all this, I became sick again, completely bedridden. I remember not eating for two days and one night. Then I could not eat anything except rice. My other brothers survived on spinach-leaves-taro-roots. On the second night, I began to have breathing problems. Everyone stared helplessly – my mother cried. Baba had gone out to get rice. He had the money but there was no rice to be found anywhere. Boro Bhai tried to pacify me, "Shombhu, Baba will come back very soon. He'll bring rice. It will be cooked and you will eat." Pangs of hunger are actually worse than the pain of death. Abba was finally able to bring some rice. He brought two sacks of rice from his rich close friend, Treasurer Tofazzal Hossain, BA. Tofazzal Hossain, BA, was a very good man, always doing for others. Later his son became a CSP Officer and his daughter was married to another CSP Officer.

A long while later, just before Abba's death, I questioned him one day, "You had many hardships in your life, but I never saw you cry."

Abba smiled slightly and said, "Shombhu, you were dying from want of rice one time. I was feeding you two or three days after that. You were a little greedy. But after eating, you were so happy that you were slapping your own knees and you kept saying, 'Abba, I don't need any more tomorrow or the day after that either. I'll drink water and survive. But after that you must go to Allah and get rice. Otherwise, I'll die.' I cried in secret that day. Not many fathers can bear the burden of their inability to feed their own child. Poverty is unbearable and hunger even more dangerous, more pitiful that, simply put, anyone who hasn't experienced this won't be able to understand."

My youngest son, Inam, asked me one day, "Abbu, I've always seen you leave some food on the table before you go to bed. Why? You never eat it!"

I thought about this for a while, then I realized that perhaps that experience of the pain of hunger, of the lack of food was still haunting me. I laughed and said, "Rice is my favorite food."

Inam said, "And yet, you eat only a handful."

I laughed again and said, "That is so that the rest of the world can eat."

There was so much going on to bring Pakistan into existence. There were riots here and protests there. Finally, the riots were about to extend to Jessore. In this situation one day, Rahim Khondakar, a big troublemaker in Jessore, gathered a few men from here and there, and armed with some sticks and swords, appeared in front of our house. Usually, no one would do anything, especially anything important, without consulting Abba. They came and announced that they wanted to kill all the people in the Hindu neighborhood next to ours.

Abba asked them all to sit there on the pathway when he heard this. He also sat down on one side. Then he said, "That is a noble cause. But you must never do anything noble on a whim. You need to think about

it carefully and get trained for it because they may try to protect themselves too. They may attack as well. So we need to think about it."

After many such arguments, Abba succeeded in persuading everyone to practice for a few days at Abul Chacha's mango grove at the sandy area by the river. Everyone agreed and the decision was publicized a little. So the Hindus grew wary and so did the Muslims. The Muslims, however, are short on patience so after three days, they dispersed. But they were all asked to be individually ready. After a few days, though, the whole incident blew over.

Sometimes, I have seen the principal of MM College bring drafts of different papers to Abba for correction and concision. And of course, there were all the job applications to check in Puratan Kashba. Abba was well-known in Jessore as a good writer. He wrote good poetry and recited them beautifully. He wrote two books, *Rupayon* in Bangla and *Parting Words to Posterity* in English, which were published. Dada, too, wrote about a hundred books which were never published.

Once, at school, when I was in second grade, I became very hungry. I had seen that some softened rice, or jao, had been cooked at home. I think it must have been around three when I decided to come home from school. I entered the kitchen to find my mother with the empty pot in front of her, crying. I believe she was crying from hunger. Another day – I was still quite young at the time – I woke up to find both Abba and Ma gone. I came out of the house and immediately heard Abba and Ma talking under the coconut tree at the back of the house. I crept forward and saw Abba sitting under the tree with his head bowed. Ma was stroking his head and saying, "Why are you doing this? Everything will be okay."

There was no rice in the house that day either. There was only fear.

To make ends meet, Abba began taking in tuitions alongside his job. He would tutor before and after work, and that would bring in ten or twelve taka. He had admitted Boro Bhai and Mejho Bhai at the Zilla School. He did not think to admit me too. I used to wander around aimlessly and sometimes help my mother around the house. My big responsibilities included coating the floor of the house and the yard with mud, washing the clothes, fetching water, cleaning the oil lamps, and cutting the wicks. I also used to bathe the younger children, dress them, and comb their hair. I would gather firewood for the cooking, cutting them to size with an axe. Another big responsibility was carrying the younger children around. Besides these, I worked in the vegetable and flower gardens, and in the kitchen, washing the dishes. I worked because I wanted to make up for the fact that I had lived.

Gradually, I learned how to cook. I cooked very well and still do. All my relatives enjoy my cooking. My other siblings did not really do much work. Boro Bhai and my younger brother, Hasan, did some though, but the work was never compulsory. It was always voluntary because most of the time, we had a servant in the house. I remember some of them: Khodaboksh, Kader, Bhanu, Bhanu's Ma, Akkas's Ma, Chchutu, Kalu, Asiya, and so many others. The servants used to befriend me. Even today, I am friends with the people who work in my home. They take care of me because I am now gradually entering into a world where I need to be taken care of.

After I finished sixth grade, I would wander from house to house, neighborhood to neighborhood, to see what needed to be done. I did so many odd jobs for so many people. It was like an addiction for me, although this addiction began to dull after I completed my matriculation exam as I had grown up a bit by then. Boro Bhai had only one thing to say – no one was allowed to show-off. If anyone did, there would be strict disciplinary action. The right to show-off belonged only to Boro Bhai, and, to a lesser extent, to Mejho Bhai. Only Hasan and Moin faced the terrifying disciplinary side of Boro Bhai.

Boro Bhai's dedication to bringing up his siblings properly was quite frightening. He would move from scolding to cursing to yelling, and finally upgrade to caning. I can't help but give an example here.

One day, only Ma and Mintu were home. Boro Bhai suddenly appeared from nowhere and told Mintu to cut and bring him a bamboo twig. Mintu took great care to do the job. I was sweeping the front yard. Boro Bhai called me to him, then grabbed me with one hand and began to beat me mercilessly with the twig. I started to scream while Ma, from the other side, screamed, "Beat him to death! Kill him yourself since he didn't die!" Then she began to cry. This beating would go on for quite some time. Boro Bhai could not be blamed actually because he believed that this beating would make his siblings better human beings. His discipline of our younger siblings then transferred to their possessions and he would come home from Khulna every Sunday for this purpose. Out of fear, my younger siblings would hide all the gifts they got from me or Abba like their T-shirts, shirts, sunglasses, shoes, watches, etc. Otherwise, Boro Bhai could come and confiscate everything. Boro Bhai's exclamation of "Show-off!" would start off a round of disciplining that did not end quickly. He would make good human beings out of all of us at any cost – that was his attitude. When Boro Bhai's car would start off for Khulna, our younger siblings would all clap. In fact, his wife, my Boro Bhabi, soon joined this group of hand-clappers.

I began to concentrate on my work. I worked hard all day and when I was faced with my studies, I showed them all that I could be the best there too. I recited the Qur'an beautifully. I adored my siblings and did everything for them. I never knew what it was to even tap anyone to scold. And slowly, very slowly, I built up a strong glass wall around me. I began to talk less and listen more. I spent my life with my parents until my matriculation, with only one friend named Kamal. I had other friends besides, but they were all scattered. This is how I escaped the clutches of Boro Bhai. Gradually, I became alone because I can keep myself company. I know how to squeeze the juicy parts of life out. I know how to see the world, so I watch. Sometimes, though, the glass was scratched but I did not pay attention to it. I love women as mothers, sisters, and sisters-in-law, as the flowers of this earth. Half of the world's population is women, that is, flowers. Therefore, the earth is a beautiful place – but there is pleasure here too. Only one woman, Ameenah, my wife, changed my world. I'm not sure but I think behind the success of every man is a woman. Perhaps it is not possible to succeed alone. And I know it is true in my case.

But I digress. The glass wall is still all around me and will continue to be there. The wall was broken two or three times in my life and brought harm to me, but I have succeeded in reconstructing it. That is why people are afraid to talk to me. Talk to me all you want through the glass, I will listen. I love to listen.

My Mejho Chacha taught at the Momen Girls' School. He taught there for perhaps forty or fifty years. He used to come to our house almost every morning, calling "Khuki! Khuki!" as he entered. Khuki was, of course, our Ma. Mejho Chacha would stay for some time whenever he came to visit and regale us with stories, poetry, and songs. Then he would leave. He would come by foot from Khadki and return by foot

as well. At one time, he began to visit more frequently and the private conversations with Abba and Ma increased. One Sunday morning, we understood the reason behind these secret talks. He wanted to adopt either Mintu or me. His three daughters were married and the one son he had did not study too far, preferring to roam around and come home whenever he felt like it. As soon as Mintu understood what was going on, he leaped into Ma's arms and declared that he was not going. I was standing in the front yard and I could tell that I was doomed. I don't know what Ma saw in my face but she hugged me to her and said, "I won't let anyone go."

In spite of this, Mejho Chacha always had a special place in his heart for me. He was very hardworking; educated too. He studied at the Jessore Zilla School, at Daulatpur, and Ripon College in Calcutta. So did my Shejho Chacha. Out of the four brothers, only Chchoto Chacha remained uneducated. However, he was very daring. Somehow he managed to get my three uncles and my father to register all their property in the village in his name. After the registration, he never shared anything with anyone. If anyone went to that area, he would keep a careful eye on them. But I liked Chchoto Chacha the most because of his Muharram[5] games. The lathikhela[6] would begin from the very first of the month of Muharram. The lathials, as the participants were known, would go from door to door to show their art, and collect donations in the process. Taleb Bhai would organize the games in our neighborhood. He was a small and handsome person, good at heart. He owned some land, a garden, and a house, and never needed to worry about meals. His job was to do for others – a truly good soul. He was a diehard Awami Leaguer but in '71, this philanthropist was killed by the Pakistanis.

August of '47 arrived – August 14th. Pakistan and India were becoming separated. The declaration was made. The radios were turned on as soon as the sun set. There was one radio in Pota Mamu's shop, so we all went there. I was not old enough to understand much, so after a little while, I returned home. The next morning I learned that we were now Pakistanis. I could not tell from Abba's face whether this made him happy or sad.

Once the Partition was complete, Boro Khalu, my uncle-in-law on my mother's side in Calcutta, sold his two homes on Park Street, built of marble stone, for twenty-two thousand rupees and decided to trade in onions. My Mamu joined him in this, stating that he was not interested in working at his damned job anymore. Boro Khalu's nephew, Motidada, a sweet-talker, also joined him in the venture in a suit, tie, hat, and pants. They rented a warehouse in Fultola, bought twenty-two thousand rupees worth of onions and stored them there. Unfortunately, the heat that season was intolerable and the price of onions dropped unimaginably. And, in spite of being fanned to keep them cool, all the onions rotted. These rotten onions then had to be thrown into the Bhoirob River. Unfortunately, again, my uncle was fined for polluting the river and he had to pay up since the custom of bribery was still not that prevalent then.

When women were first given the right to vote, we were still quite little. My mother was taken to the voting center at the Islamic School to cast her vote. We gathered around her and asked, "Whom did you vote for? Whom?" There was no reply – only a little smile at the corners of her lips. Two or three days

[5] The first month on the Islamic calendar, when the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), is commemorated.
[6] An exhibition fight with sticks.

later, my mother fished out her ballot paper from the folds of her sari and said, "They all wanted it – and I couldn't decide, so I hid the paper and brought it home." This was my first experience with voting.

At one time, Ma asked Abba to buy a cow so we could have milk. Abba borrowed some money and bought a white-colored cow from Shujolpur. I named her "Dhola." Dhola loved me and I returned the love. Dhola died in my arms from old age. When she was dying, Dhola stared at me with tears in her eyes. I cried too. But she had given us plenty of milk during her lifetime and we had not only drunk it, we had sold it too. Abba never asked me to do anything, but I would do things anyway for my mother. I would sell the cow's milk and vegetables in the market, and give the money to Ma. She would then give me some to keep. This was my business. I felt that I needed to stand on my own two feet, so I always tried to earn something from my childhood. My life as a businessman later in life was deeply influenced by this childhood attitude.

I used to go to the haat or village market with Abba. One day, Abba showed me a turtle at the haat. There were several little huts behind the area at which the turtles were sold. I pointed to them and asked Abba, "Is there a haat in those huts too?" Abba, startled, replied, "No, no! Witches live there. Beware! Never go there." Of course, right away, I got it into my head that I had to see the witches. So one morning, after selling my milk, I took my friend, Kanakethe, and went to see the witches. As soon as we got there, we were caught by Pushpo. Pushpo was incredibly beautiful. I was quite good-looking as a child and Pushpo lavished her attention on me. She chatted with me and gave me four laalmohon[7] to eat. I went there one other time but never saw any witches. There were only women there who were all very kind to us. When Pushpo passed by in a rickshaw, people whistled at her and I would feel bad. I asked Pushpo sadly, "Why can't you live in a nice house?" Pushpo laughed at me and said, "You won't understand. And listen, never come back here again. You shouldn't come here." Her words scared me a little.

In the meantime, one day, Shejho Chacha came and scolded my father. He said, "Why haven't you sent your son to school yet? How could you buy him a cow? I heard that he mixes with the bad boys and smokes bidis. Do you want to spoil your son?" Abba always looked up to his brother and would never speak against him. The next day Abba put two annas in my hand and pointed me to a school in the neighborhood run by my uncle and said, "Go there. Headmaster Johur will admit you." And that is how my school life began. But I never stopped working at home. I also used to work at the school doing chores like sweeping, ringing the bell, sounding the azaan[8], fanning the headmaster, and so on. I was the only one exempt from the headmaster's well-oiled cane.

Johur sir was our headmaster – a very strict man. He had five well-oiled canes that moved like machines. Everyone had a mark of the cane on his back. A few days after I began, my younger brother Mintu joined me. When the exam results came out, I found that I had topped the class. But after all the results had been distributed, Mintu was still standing alone, waiting for his. Then, losing his patience, he shouted, "You bloody Master, where's my result?" There was no saving Mintu after that – eight or ten lashes of the cane came down on his back. Even as he ran away, Mintu kept yelling, "Bloody headmaster!" The truth is, studying during our time was a nightmare.

Our school was free. We used to write on palm leaves. There were twenty-seven students in the class – all barefoot. Our uniforms were shorts – or something like shorts – made out of old markin-cloth sugar sacks.

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[7] An expensive sweetmeat
[8] The Muslim call for prayer

And then there was Headmaster Johur's cane. Apart from me, I do not believe anyone escaped a lash from that cane. I would do small jobs at school and still I came out first in the exams. So I was given a scholarship. I handed over the two-taka scholarship money to Abba who was very happy at my success. In the meantime, the country was divided. Abba's salary increased and we finally overcame poverty.

There was a Hindu neighborhood by the main road at the end of ours in Puratan Kashba. This neighborhood became filled with Muslims from India after '47 and Puratan Kashba lost its personality. Italian Roman Catholic missionaries built the Fatima Hospital in front of our eyes. Dr. Maria used to work there. She was martyred at the hands of the Pakistani army in '71. I remember we could get powdered milk from there. Once or twice, we even got ghee. MM College was right next to the hospital. It was the only college in Jessore. One of three radios in the neighborhood was housed at MM College. We used to listen to the commentaries on the cricket matches on that radio. The other radio was in Khodaboksh's shop.

Dighol Zamindar's tax house was in Kashba next to which was a huge pond known as the Royal Pond. The pond was perfect for us to swim and bathe in. Besides it belonged to the jailhouse prisoners. The River Bhoirob flowed behind our house. It is still there but it is a dead river now. There was a huge garden in front of our house and an ancient dilapidated house. I believe that house belonged to Pari Bibi.

The area across from the Royal Pond was known as the Christian neighborhood. A lot of the Muslims who had converted to Christianity lived there. There was a church by the road where a school was later built. If you walked on for a while from there, there was the cantonment from the time of British rule. Once a brigade of soldiers arrived, most of whom were Pakistanis. A brigadier lived by the gate of the Fatima Hospital. He had two cannons and we would go over to see them.

There was an airport in the cantonment. It had been built during the Second World War. There were several hundred airplanes there but they stood unused after the war and gradually grew smaller. The aluminum that these planes were built with was converted into pots and pans during the night. Abba would take us for visits there on Sunday evenings. There was a place called Shantala where planes would land – first Oriental, then PIA. We even went there to watch the planes take off. One day Liaquat Ali Khan came to visit. His wife, Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, was with him. We were taken to meet him. Liaquat Ali was sitting in an armchair, his head bare of his cap. He was completely bald! I remember being surprised to see that. We had been taught that he was the Prime Minister of Pakistan – a good man.

I was very attracted to the airport in those days.

There was a grove in an inner section of our neighborhood. Manik, a boy in our class, whose father worked in the forestry department, and his family came to live by that grove. We used to pick mangoes from the grove with their permission. Snacks, for us, grew on trees, unlike the different types of snacks we now make at home. The grove was on high ground. From that point to the river below, we owned a three-bigha piece of land. I used to do this and that on the land and sometimes, I would bring home a piece of wood or two. The pieces were quite heavy but even at twelve, I was able to carry them. The land caught the eye of a wandering hermit. He began to grow very close to Abba. One day, after convincing Abba, he had the land registered to him in exchange for a Raleigh bicycle. Much later, we learned that he had sold the land for eighty thousand taka and run away to India.

The students at school were all children from our neighborhood. There was Monna, Faksha, Foni, Kencho, Asha, Monu, Kanakethe, Badshah, Inu, Lame Manik, Nuru, Khokon, Dulal, Nurjalal, Mahbub, Mizan, Motiyar, Shobha, Gora, and many others. In those days, children used to be given such names. Many continued to be known by these names even after they grew up. Some were given showy names. These names have become lost over time. All the kids had distended stomachs and sores on their feet; eczema; dull eyes. I used to go out sometimes with these friends and wander around the forests and gardens. This would happen after lunch. The field by the River Bhoirob used to become inundated if there was a flood or the tide came in. This was known as the gaangdiyar. We could find many kinds of vegetables and spinach there. We would play on the gaangdiyar until dark sometimes.

On the other side of the river, perhaps the whole area or a mile at least, was the Hindu neighborhood. The women would come to the riverbank at sunset and ululate. It sounded so good but we were a little afraid too. I asked Abba, "Will I become a Hindu if I listen to the ululations?" Abba reassured me and said, "No, there's no chance of that at all."

There was no mosque here at that time, so there was no azaan. We had to estimate the time and pray on our own, or pray after the ululation stopped.

One day at school we heard that Manik's uncle had come in a car. He was a big officer. At break, we all ran to see. We learned that he was unable to eat because there was no knife or fork to eat with. Apparently those unknown items could be found at the house of a deputy who lived close to Khodaboksh's shop. We all marched down to the house in a parade to bring those items but we could not see them because Tall Tolef (the officer's nephew) put them on a plate and covered them up. Then he held the plate above our heads and carried it back. The main thing is Manik's uncle was saved as he could finally eat.

Chacha came out – solar hat on his head with a white half-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts on. His socks came up to just below his knees and were tied there tightly with a ribbon. He had a short stick in his hand with which he was gently hitting himself. Anyway, he climbed into his car but the car refused to start. The driver kept cranking the engine to no avail. Finally, we were made to pull the car by a fifty-foot rope to get the engine going. We turned back to find Headmaster Johur looking at us. It was as though Azrail[9] himself had landed with his five canes. I cannot possibly narrate the havoc that was wreaked upon us then courtesy of those five well-oiled canes.

However, after a half hour of this, all twenty-seven of us sat down in a line on the ground and through our tears began to recite the multiplication tables as loudly as we could, "Two times one two, two times two four…" I think the whole village must have heard and that is why Headmaster Johur was so popular among the parents.

One time, I went to Shejho Chacha's home before Eid and found him grumbling over one small and two medium sized bundles. His son was occupied by an adda[10] with friends and now he would have to carry these bundles to his in-laws himself.

I said, "Chacha, may I carry one for you?"

[9] The Angel of Death in the Qur'an
[10] A gathering of friends where any topic is open for discussion

Chacha hesitated and asked, “Can you?”

I said, “Yes.”

He lifted one of the bundles on to my head. The bundles contained Eid gifts – clothes for the entire in-law clan. I was seven or eight at the time. I carried the bundle on my head to my uncle’s in-laws’ home. After putting the bundle down, I said, “May I go now, Chacha?”

Chacha asked, “Are you going to the Eid prayer then?”

I replied, “Abba bought new clothes for Mintu this time. So Mintu will go to the prayer. He will give me new clothes on the next Eid so I can wear them and go to the prayer. Abba said that the Eid prayer is not compulsory.”

The corners of Chacha’s eyes seemed to moisten with tears at my words.

This uncle of mine was a bit temperamental. He was a Swadeshi and he possessed arms. At one time, he was hiding in cemeteries and graveyards just to escape being arrested. In spite of this, he was arrested from a graveyard in Nilganj once. After the British left, he began to teach at a school. Then, with a few friends of his, he started his own school and called it “Muslim Academy.” This school still exists in Jessore. He had taken me to that school forcefully because no one was achieving a First Division from there. Chacha lived just ten yards away from our house.

Later, though, Mejho Chacha, in a fit of anger, sold his house to a constable and moved away to Khadki. Mejho Chacha used to sing and write poetry. And I have never seen anyone eat as little as he did. During the summer, he would eat a little, then lie down in the afternoon on a blanket on the lawn with another blanket covering him. He would put on socks and a woolen hat to soak up the sun. He always ate his food hot. He would cut out a quarter of a roshogolla[11], warm it up, and then eat it with a gloved hand from a warm spoon. The water he drank had to be brought from the middle of the pond and boiled.

No one was aware of the moment this Mejho Chacha of mine left the world at the age of 83. Just like every day, he said his evening prayers, ate his dinner, then said the night prayer before hanging up his mosquito net himself and going to bed. It came to be known in the morning that he had fallen into eternal sleep during the night.

When I was young, Abba would take me to Pachu Doctor of the railroad whenever I got sick. He had a brick house and one good table. He sat in a revolving chair which used to attract me. He would make his own medicine. Sometimes, we would go to Bolai Babu, the homeopathic doctor who lived by the corner of the police station. These people were very sincere at that time. They were kind and would take their time to examine the patients.

Once every year, Chapabu would come to visit with her husband, son, and daughter. When I was seven years old, I had only one piece of clothing to wear. That shirt was washed on Sunday. So, because it was winter, I was told to stay indoors in my patched up pants and whatever I could find to cover my body. Mintu had gone off with his friends. So I peeked through a hole in the bamboo wall to see them. Chapabu was a true beauty who spoke sweetly in the Jessore dialect. She wore a gorgeous sari, lots of jewelry, and

[11] A sweetmeat soaked in sugar syrup

a shawl over her shoulder. I was very impressed. The two children, a girl and a boy called Henu and Khokon, were in suits and pants. How beautiful! My brother-in-law had four children from an earlier marriage. He was a little older but he wore a suit too. My mother was very pretty too but compared to theirs, her clothes were very plain. Even though we were poor, I vowed that when I became rich some day, I would dress my mother and my wife in such finery as Chapabu's. Over the course of my life, I have only loved my mother, Chapabu, Ameenah, and Raniya. If anyone has been left off this list, I apologize, but I love all women because they are our mothers – the flowers of the earth.

After independence, we heard one day that Mejho Chacha's daughter, Gupibu, was to be admitted into MM College. She was to be the first female student. Some people were expected to oppose the move so a small procession accompanied her to the college. We were among the crowd too. Some of us younger ones had on shorts and no shirt, while others had a shirt and no shorts on. Boro Bhai, Abba, Shejho Chacha, and Amin Chacha were also part of the procession.

My mother believed in pirs and fakirs.[12] I read the holy books for her, sounded the call for prayer at the mosque, and prayed. One day, as I performed wudu[13], I asked the Moulvi, "Sir, look! The water from our ablutions is moving downwards. Why doesn't it move upwards?" Moulvi Shaheb thought for a bit on hearing my words, then he said, "It's all the wish of Allah." I believed him. My encounter with gravitational force came later in life.

A strange-looking fakir in a long, loose-fitting outfit appeared at our house that evening. He had walked here after his pilgrimage in Makkah and, as a traveler, he would spend the night at our house. Ma became very busy. Someone was handing him the water pot while someone else rushed to make up a bed in the guest room. After prayers, the fakir indulged in the huge feast prepared for him while we all went to bed on half-empty stomachs. Abba remained unperturbed.

The next day was a holiday but the fakir showed no signs of leaving. He continued to enjoy the feasts prepared only for a favored son-in-law. After the Asr[14] prayer though, since the fakir promised to tell the story of his Hajj, we all, including my mother, bathed, performed our ablutions, put on as many clean clothes as possible, placed crocheted caps on our heads, and sat around the fakir.

Ma sat behind a curtain while Abba lay on his bed, reading.

Fakir Shaheb delved into his story but when he came to the part about walking around the Ka'abah, Mintu asked, "Do women do this walk as well?" The huzur[15] replied, "Of course they do! Especially the women from the black countries who look like elephants. They hit you with their elbows as they walk. And if you get hit by one of their breasts, who knows where you will land!" We were taken aback by the comment while Ma exclaimed, "Astagfirullah!"[16] and quickly went into the kitchen. The next morning we found that the huzur had left the house during the night.

[12] Muslim saints and holy men
[13] Ablution
[14] Late afternoon prayer
[15] A term used to address someone royal (Your Majesty, Your Highness)
[16] "I seek forgiveness from Allah."

Abba implemented some rules in the house. We were to rise early and return home before the Maghrib[17] azaan or before dark. If we did not, the front door would not be opened for us. Everyone was responsible for his own schoolwork. However, if we needed help, we could ask Abba. Failing was not an option. If anyone did, he would be expelled from home. Mejho Bhai failed once and was expelled from the house for ten months.

We were not to use loud voices and were never to back talk to elders. We could not fight. He said that fighting constituted abuse and it never had the desired results. Neither Ma nor Abba ever laid their hands on anyone. But Boro Bhai and Mejho Bhai would poke or hit each other when Abba was not looking.

These two brothers of mine had different agendas. Boro Bhai wanted to educate his brothers and sisters so that the influence transferred to the next generation while Mejho Bhai wanted to dominate us. This does not mean that Boro Bhai did not love us or look after us. He loved all the young ones. But he was a strict disciplinarian and made sure no one was spoiled. I am grateful to Boro Bhai too.

I used to do everything – even as I studied and came first in class. But I would still wander off to distant places every afternoon, from village to village. Of course, I was accompanied by a couple of friends. Shivers would run down my spine every time I visited the Karbala Christian Cemetery. That was because I had heard that Christians were buried standing straight up and those British Christians would die only in twenty-seven to forty years. I had no doubt in my mind that this minimum punishment was their due because they were Christians and they had taken over another's country.

Ma's Boro Mamu, our grandfather, came to visit with dates and water from the zamzam well[18] on his return from Hajj. Usually he would put a little something in Ma's hands before leaving. He was very handsome to look at – tall and slim. He had a white beard and hair. He told us some stories about Hajj. Usually the Hajj stories were all the same but I gathered some new information from his stories. All the houses in Makkah was made of mud. The roofs were made by plastering the date trees with mud. There was very little rain and the walls of the houses were made of mud as well. Hajj was a good time for business for those with money. The rest, especially the women, would make holes in the mud walls and hold their hands out to the pilgrims through them to beg for alms. I am talking about the Saudi Arabia of 1950. And yet today, we sell our labor to them so cheaply that it is haram.[19] They call us "miskin," that is, beggars, which too is haram. The Americans and the British sell their labor to the Saudis too but they receive a fair price as well as respect. I have seen this myself in 1994.

Mamu, my uncle, was involved in a riot in Calcutta some days before the Partition. My Boro Khalu was in Calcutta at the time. He owned a large house in Shiddhipasha. There was an incredibly beautiful mosque there too with a pond both outside and inside the compound. There were high walls all around with an area for pujas[20] as well. Khalu was not very educated and had wasted his days with friends. Two days after the riot, he went to Mamu's house to see how he was doing. According to Khalu, he found Mamu hiding under his bed in a sorry state. He had not eaten in two days. Khalu pulled him out from there, washed and dressed him, and then took him to his house. Ma and my grandmother were anxiously waiting

[17] The evening prayer
[18] The miraculous well created by Allah for Abraham's infant son, Ishmael.
[19] Forbidden by Islamic law
[20] Hindu form of worship

to hear some news of him. They had only heard rumors. Khalu arrived around this time with Mamu at our house in Jessore and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. We took him to Poygram Kashba. You should have seen Mamu's arrogance after he reached his safe haven. He was ready to kill giants!

After 1947, the number of Hindus in the city began to fall consistently. Not everyone left though. The lower castes, like the poor, the untouchables, the shoemakers, the sweepers, the barbers, the executioners, and the milkmen, stayed. The rich Hindus left behind their huge houses and their land, and almost ran away. All the civil servants, doctors, lawyers, teachers, judges, writers, businessmen, traders left as the starving, skeletal Muslims watched in their loincloths. What fear drove them away? The fear of those loin-clothed Muslims or their own 190-year old misdeeds? Or for fear of the Biharis? In any case, the educated Hindus left and in their place came the savage, murderous Biharis.

We received only half a country. If we were to make a country with the whole area, then Calcutta would be gone. And neither Gandhiji nor Nehru wanted this. So the Hindus cut the head off that half a country and left us with a headless half country. And into this headless half came the Biharis, the Europeans, the Urdu-speaking people, and later, the Punjabis. What a fate! After the 190 years of British and Hindu torture, eighty percent of the low-caste Hindus and Muslims were extremely happy to become a part of Pakistan and declared themselves Pakistanis. But it did not take too long to pay for this either. When people heard that "Urdu and Urdu alone will be the State Language of Pakistan," the seeds of Bangladesh were sown because fifty-seven per cent of Pakistanis spoke Bangla while only three per cent spoke Urdu. The rest spoke Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, and Pakhtun. Where did Urdu come in? Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the father of the Muslim nation even though he was not a true Muslim. He never prayed in his life and could only speak in English. He had no interest in East Pakistan. To West Pakistan, East Pakistan was good only for sucking dry. The West Pakistanis thought East Pakistan was an area filled with swamps and jungles; that the people lived in trees and machans, and spoke some savage language; that snakes moved around freely. But since it came free, why not take it? The high caste Hindus needed Nehru and Gandhiji in Calcutta, so Bengal had to be divided if Calcutta was to survive. That Calcutta now belongs to the Marwaris. If you keep reading, you will find out more about this.

Then the Biharis began to arrive. They set up a separate neighborhood for themselves. There were quite a few houses by the river on the way to the city close to the highway that were left by the Hindus. The Biharis settled there. They began to declare that they had built Pakistan. In fact, according to them, even those of us whose ancestors lived here for years did not have a right to be in this part of the world. They would use any excuse to dominate the Bangalis. They would bring out processions, brandishing weapons, to show their supremacy. I do not know if the government was behind any of this but it certainly did nothing to stop them. And at one time, we even became victims of the Biharis.

There was a small room in the outer compound of our home. This room was rented out to a Bihari without any forethought. The Bihari's mother was mad. This madwoman one day went inside our house and locked the door, declaring that she would not come out. We all tried to persuade her but to no avail. Finally, Abba went to the police station. The OC listened to the whole story, then advised Abba, "Kazi Shaheb, they're Biharis and there's nothing we can do to them. In fact, it would be better if you just left the house yourself." Abba was amazed at his words. He lost his temper, yelled at the policeman, and returned home. Fortunately, the madwoman's son had managed to persuade her to open the door and got her out.

The Biharis brought near-dead cows on a bullock-cart and slaughtered them. The meat was strung and made into kebabs over an open fire. They had a buried earthen container from which they fished out the bread stored there and ate them with the kebabs. We watched from afar, terrified. After dark, their qawwalis[21] would begin and when it got late, they would go inside their houses with their rams because they cannot sleep without the stench of their rams' pee around them.

1952. Abba suddenly became ill with a fever. The fever did not break even after a few days so he was admitted to the Jessore Government Hospital. He had typhoid. Medication for the illness had only just begun to come into the market. Boro Bhai stayed with him at the hospital one night, I the next. While at the hospital, I heard noises during the night coming from a room about twenty yards away. I opened the door slowly one day and saw that bodies were being carried there on planks. The next day I learned that they were dead bodies. They were being taken to the morgue. By this time, the fever was making Abba unconscious. One night it seemed as though Abba was dead. I ran to get Wadud Bhai, the compounder. He was a good compounder, almost like a doctor. I told him, "Abba is no more. He's dead!" He threw me over his shoulder in one swift movement and ran. He entered the room and checked my father's pulse, then heaving a sigh of relief, he looked at me. No, nothing so awful had happened.

It was in '52 that Abba decided to go to Calcutta and I was chosen to accompany him, much to Mintu's chagrin.

We got off at Shealdah Station and were received by Abba's teacher, Sanyal Babu's oldest son who was six feet five inches tall. To my great delight, he took us to his home in Park Street on a double-decker bus. Abba greeted Sanyal Babu and Mamima with great respect. They took care of us with as much hospitality as possible. Sanyal Babu used to teach at the Jessore Zilla School and lived in Chachra.

He had made his home in Park Street after the Partition. He informed us that the rest of his children would arrive by evening as they were scattered around India. Once they all gathered together in the evening, the family said a prayer before sitting with us and serving us dinner. Then they ate together. Over the next few days, Abba and I saw all the sights of Calcutta with Sanyal Babu's youngest son: Gorer Math, the monument, Victoria Hall, the zoo, Howrah Bridge, Howrah Station, the Botanical Garden, Ripon College, the hostel for the unemployed, College Street, the Coffee House, Bethune College, and the Edo Pukur behind which was the Scottish Church College. The tram stop at Bethune was called "Hedo" to the left of which was Goa Bagan. Abba took me to see it. The area was huge but all the houses were squashed together. Abba pointed to House No. 10/D on Radhanath P. Bose Lane in Goa Bagan and said he had visited this house often when he was in college. He did not say anything else. The only thing he said after coming out from Goa Bagan was that this had been a popular place for the Swadeshis. There used to be a Swadeshi in each of the homes here but the word "Swadeshi" meant nothing to me. Later I learned that the British had been unable to do anything to Goa Bagan. From Hedo, we got on the tram and returned to Park Circus. Then we headed off towards 24 Pargana Khaspur to Shejho Khalu's home. I was so tired that I fell asleep as soon as we arrived. I was woken up for dinner. I had a lot of cousins there so we spent the time in fun and laughter.

[21] A type of Muslim devotional music/song

We returned to Jessore after a lemonade stop at Calcutta. The tension between Mintu and me continued for three months.

I was in Class Four now. The scholarship exam took place and I got through. But then we learned that Upper Primary would now be up to Class Five. So we would have to stay in primary school for another year and sit for the scholarship exam again. However, I would receive a scholarship for the current year. Our headmaster received a monthly salary of three taka from the government, but because of the Second World War, the British government had reduced that salary to one taka. Around this time, I became more involved in different activities. I arranged to have a sports competition on the sandy area by the river and nominated myself Chief Organizer.

At this point in my life, I realize that all my life, I have always been the chairman, or the president, or the MD of my own concerns. No one nominated me for these positions. I was never awarded anything in my life except for the occasional medal from here and there. Perhaps I was just not worthy enough. One needs to have a certain something for such positions and it does not come just like that. One must dedicate time to it. One needs to work for it and get people running around for it to heighten public relations. One needs to talk to people. Even the Nobel Prize is not given just like that. Those who are awarding the prizes also need to be interested. Even so, I know, some people do get credit on their own merit.

As the Chief Organizer, I arranged for different types of balloons, festoons, stickers, banana trees, and set up the scene for the sports competition. The day of the competition arrived but Mintu and Pota Mama's son, Gora, conspired against me and broke everything to pieces. In spite of that, the games were successful.

Once I went to the cinema with my parents. My siblings were with us too. I did not quite understand the whole movie – and how could I? I was too busy trying to figure out how those people had got behind the screen and how they could appear in the front as well. The movie was not too bad – the only problem was I kept fidgeting because of the fleas and the heat. I had taken off my shirt and sweat was streaming down my face.

When Boro Bhai and a couple of other boys in the neighborhood first passed their matriculation exam, we were overjoyed. Our neighborhood was not yet too keen on education, so the results were not always great. But regardless of this, a few days before any exam, each home rang with the voices of examinees from two in the morning to dawn as they studied. The boys, especially, read out loud in tune. The whole neighborhood echoed with their voices. When the exams were over, the results would be announced, usually at the end of the day. Very few of the candidates succeeded and it was a common sight to see either a father or a big brother chasing the unsuccessful examinee in their home to beat him up for failing! The examinees ran helter-skelter, some even climbing up into trees while others jumped into the ponds to escape. Some of them would get caught, of course, and the sounds of their physical torture would echo all over. After dark, the neighborhood would slowly calm down. This had become a yearly ritual for the students.

When vaccination time came around at the school, the tree-climbing episode began again. The boys used to even climb up the wood-apple trees for fear of the needles. When the vaccine-givers left in the evening, they would climb down from the trees, covered in innumerable scratches from the thorns and blood dripping from the cuts – all to avoid just one shot!

The biggest festival during our time was Pohela Boishakh.[22] A celebration would take place to ceremonially open the new account books of the year. We could get many different kinds of sweetmeats on the occasion. I had gone to some of these celebrations with Abba. Most of the shops celebrating the occasion belonged to Hindus. The Muslims did not have any shops – or at least I do not remember anyone with one.

Once, on Pohela Boishakh, I went to the fair to find a man showing something. We had to stick our faces into a box covered by a black cloth. We had to peep through a hole in the box and we would see different colored pictures. That was the bioscope. I was fascinated. I believed this was within my means and I planned right away to make one for myself. I returned home and got a lantern to cut through. Then I pushed a reel through the cut, keeping a place for the peephole. Pictures of the Taj Mahal, Badshah Shahjahan, Madhubala, and others were collected and glued to the reel in a roll. My bioscope was more or less ready. At that time, there was no tenant on the top floor of Monu's house. So we made that our cinema hall. We even had a grand opening with Monu as my cashier. The neighborhood children came and paid one paisa to watch the show. Monu tied the coins up at one end of his lungi[23] and tucked the end in at the waist. On the second day, Mintu came with some friends. They gave Monu's lungi a sudden tug and all the coins came raining down to the floor. Everyone scrambled to grab the coins and ran off. And I shut down my cinema.

Every Sunday, Abba used to take care of the more time-consuming household chores, like putting in the stakes for the fence, cutting the wood and bamboo, making sacks for work. When Ma was sick, Abba would cook. We could barely just swallow that food. Later, of course, I began to cook.

All my life I have seen Abba walk several miles in the early morning, and on his way home, he would bring butter and cheese. He used to do free-hand exercises but I never saw his clothes ride up above knees. Neither did I ever see him barefoot. He never spoke loudly but his words were filled with humor.

Abba used to read and he would tell us to read as well. Every afternoon, he would sit in his easy chair on the verandah and read. There was no end to the number of authors from around the world that he would read. It was as though Shakespeare was standing on the stage or Shelley was reciting a poem.

A Bihari man from Calcutta called Deedar had settled here some time ago. He was one of the first to start slaughtering cows and selling meat. He did this once a week – no permission required. I invested some money in his business. Deedar lent the money to Rahim Khunkar. The man fell into a large debt so Deedar went to see Rahim about the money one evening. By then, Rahim Khunkar had already downed a bottle or two. The empty bottles landed on Deedar's head and shoulders, and that was the end of my business.

The scholarship exam was held again in Class Five. I received the scholarship – two taka every month until Class Ten. I would not need to pay any other fee until matriculation. But at this time, Shejho Chacha swooped down and admitted me into Muslim Academy. My two older brothers, my father, and my uncle had all gone to the Zilla School. But Muslim Academy was my Shejho Chacha's former school and so I had to go there. The school had a tin roof and walls but there was no paint on the walls. The floor had sand. The tin roof was probably quite old, so it leaked. There were a couple or so good teachers and Javed

[22] The first day of the Bangali New Year.
[23] The sarong-like garment worn by men in Bangladesh

Sir was the headmaster. After Javed Sir left, Matin Sir from Khadki became the headmaster. He had a calm, dignified face and a full beard. His top, his pajamas, his shoes made him a symbol of beauty to us. He would talk to the good students, listen to them, and encourage them. My Shejho Chacha was also a teacher who was good at math. My Urdu teacher was Shawkat Sir and I would get good marks in Urdu. And then there was Khogen Sir who was brilliant at math and English Grammar. He would teach me very affectionately. We had another BSc teacher for math but I cannot remember his name anymore.

How old was I? Probably fourteen or fifteen. We were restless. We had to be doing something all the time. One day Mizan, Motiar, Shobha, I, and a few others were joking around. Soon we were in the last room of Dorbesh Mojid's building. A deputy lived there with his newly-wed wife. There was a hole in the wall through which the dirty water could be thrown out. We peeked in through that and saw something shocking. Everyone wanted to see and a commotion ensued. This was nothing short of scandalous – the inkwell sat on top while the pen lay underneath! They soon heard us, of course, and quickly closed up the hole with a piece of cloth. We ran towards the Rajpukur, or huge pond, and the next morning we saw a bullock cart laden with the household goods from that room set off for somewhere. We never saw that deputy again after this incident.

In the meantime, I came to know that Mintu had learned to ride a bicycle and had also managed to borrow Abba's old bicycle to ride sometimes. I begged him to teach me how to ride a bike. He agreed – for the price of two annas.[24] Then he took me to the red gravel road in front of the school where I climbed on to the seat in my lungi while he sat behind me and gave orders. I headed off shakily. At one point, Mintu said, "I let go of the bike some time ago. You are riding on your own now." Hearing this, I went on for another six feet or so and tumbled over, lungi and all, onto the road. My ego was badly hurt. But I managed to learn how to ride that very day and got my money's worth.

Falling off a bike is an interesting experience. It feels as though it takes a while to fall. I want to stop it but I cannot. No one can stop you when you are falling off a bike. The smart ones fall without hurting their egos, and those like me are completely embarrassed.

And then came bad luck. Not once, but twice. I fought a battle with malaria. After recovering for a few days, I went down with a fever again. My temperature fluctuated between 101 and 103 degrees with no sign of remission. First, the local doctor was called, then the homeopath, but after twenty days, the doctor declared, "Typhoid." I was stunned because just a few days ago, Manik had lost his leg to typhoid and was now lame. I could not eat anything and my body became skin and bones. One night, I asked Ma in a thin voice, "Ma, am I going to die tonight?" Ma cried and hugged me to her, saying, "Your Abba will come and everything will be alright." Abba came and, sure enough, one day, after suffering for a month, I became well.

When I was in Class Eight, a distant cousin of mine, Gora, and I began to do a two-mile run, push-ups, the parallel bar, and some other free-hand exercises. We also wore loincloths to wrestle and box. We would be done by seven in the morning and would round it off with two small jugs of milk, some tomatoes and some bananas. When tomatoes were not available, we would eat double the number of bananas. This is where I first met Kamal from Concord. Gradually, I got to know him better. I went to his home and learned that they had moved from India to settle here in Jessore. They had found a good house in the loan

[24] A currency unit equivalent to 1/16 of a taka

office neighborhood. Kamal would visit my house too and we grew close. During our ninth and tenth years in school, we would ride on a bike for five or six miles every afternoon. The bike belonged to him. I would ride for five miles while he sat on the rod; then he would ride the five miles back while I sat on the rod. Kamal and I were both good-looking, so everyone called us the inseparable pair. Later, I understood that people suspected we were gay. We were very good friends indeed but we were certainly not gay.

There was another incident with the bicycle. Mejho Bhai had given strict instructions that no one, except Abba, was to ride the Raleigh bicycle given to Abba by the hermit. But Mintu was constantly looking for an opportunity. He managed to gain some technical knowledge and found that if the bicycle was moved backwards, the chain did not make any noise. One Sunday, seeing his chance in the afternoon, Mintu took the bike out to the Rajpukur. There he rode around happily, singing the "Jhumka, jhumka" song. Suddenly Mejho Bhai's heavy hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. Mejho Bhai had rushed down for half a mile to get Mintu. On the way back, Mejho Bhai was seen with one hand on the bike, the other hand pulling Mintu by the ear. Even in such a situation, Mintu could not stand the fact that the cycle was being walked home. So he cried out, "Mejho Bhai, please get on the bike, hold my ear, and ride while I sit on the handlebars." Of course that did not work and Mejho Bhai brought him walking home. When Abba woke up from his nap, complaints were made. Ma woke up and received the complaints as well. All Abba said was, "Don't do it again."

Sports was a part of my life at Muslim Academy and we used to go three or four miles away for yearly picnics. We had to cook for ourselves. On the field there, we would clap and play games, win and lose. After much fun, we would return home in the evening. We had to learn how to swim. I had learned how to swim at a young age because I was interested but Abba had to teach Mintu. And that scared Mintu so badly that he tried to run away, and finding no other place to hide, he jumped straight into the pond itself!

Another time, I was reading Sharatchandra's "Rajlakshmi o Srikanto" when Mintu and Alehaja came into the guestroom with a dirty book, lay on their chests on the bed, and began to tear the pages of the book out quickly. Mejho Bhai spotted them through the window, threw open the door, grabbed them both by the ears and presented the criminals in front of Abba with the torn book as evidence, demanding justice. Abba laughed and said, "You could have read this a year or two later. But since they've already read it, let them. The more they read, the better off they will be."

My only maternal uncle, a loving man, lived in Poygram Kashba. He worked in Calcutta and loved us dearly.

The teachers loved us too and our days passed by joyfully. We used to play football with great enthusiasm. One or two of the students were perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six years old. The hire-purchase system had come into practice by then but our team at Muslim Academy was very strong.

Mamu had not married yet but he was already past his prime. He would come quite often to Jessore from Calcutta and would always bring us something. That was our time to eat apples and grapes, even though each share was small after being divided out. Mamu would read newspapers and novels out loud so everyone could hear. He would have long conversations with my father with Mamu sitting on the verandah and my father lying down indoors. Quite a few days later, Mamu left for Chittagong. He fell in love with the place. It was the land of the fakirs and saints. He could tell us strange and interesting stories about

them. I did not know then that they were strange stories though. We all simply sat around him and listened. One of the stories was about Bayajid Bostami along with other stories about ghosts and djinns. Mamu was a cowardly sort. If he was asked to slaughter a chicken, he would make one stroke with the knife, let the chicken go, and faint. The chicken would be flapping around, headless. When my Mamu was asked if he had seen the ocean, he said yes, but only from the top of a hill. He had not dared to go down to the beach!

Mamu used to sleep on the cot in the verandah, snoring loudly. If he got cold during the night, he would pull his lungi up to cover his upper body. So until Abba got up and covered him with a quilt, no one could go out onto the verandah.

We had few places to visit, especially as there was not enough to spare. We would go to Murli once a year to Sodu Chacha and Begumbu's home (they were husband and wife). They had fallen in love through their love of singing; their wedding took place with songs; and they spent their lives in the same way. We would visit my paternal cousin, Juthibu, in Khadki as well as Mejho Chacha. And we would go to stay with my maternal grandmother in Poygram Kashba. It was a place we could eat at and relax in.

A few days before our Class Ten pre-test, I went to school a little early. There I saw someone sitting on the verandah, his face looking quite disfigured. On looking closer, I saw it was Habib from Sylhet. I asked him, 'What happened, Habib?' He began to cry and said his two step-brothers, a subedar and a boxer in the army, with whom he stayed had beaten him up and thrown him out. I said, 'You can't attend class like this. Come with me. Let me take you to my home.' I informed my mother and went off to school again. I told Abba about him at night. Abba said, 'Let him stay. Just add one extra handful of rice to the pot and some extra water to the dal.[25] We'll manage.' Habib was very friendly. He became like one of the family except that now my study area grew smaller because Nurjalal Master and Alehaja also used to come and study with me every evening.

As I grew older, I began to get involved with the cultural scene with Abba. I went to Abolakanto Mojumdar's house when I was younger where there would be a gathering of poets and singers. I won first prize reciting poetry there. I also began to write a little now. I even had one of my books nicely bound from the bookbinder's. I drew margins on the pages of an exercise book, drew designs around the edges and wrote in them. My handwriting was beautiful and everyone praised it, saying, "This boy will be a great writer someday." Our home was a safe zone for books thanks to Abba. Abba and Ma both loved to read and so we had access to many books outside the classroom.

Once there was to be a play production at the UP compound in Kazi Para's Puratan Kashba. The director was Hajera Bhai. Hajera Bhai was a very neat person, always in a white panjabi[26] and pajama with a light cream colored folded shawl thrown over his shoulder. His wife was Christian and the whole family was good-looking. Their beautiful house was covered with myrtle creepers which gave off a deep fragrance. Sitting arrangements were made in the front yard. Sometimes on a rainy evening or a full-moon night, the place would take on an aura of strange beauty. Hajera Bhai would sit there and recite some poetry, or he would deliver some dialogues from a play. I loved it. He also had a beautiful daughter who sang very well.

[25] Lentil soup
[26] A knee-length, full-sleeved, loose-fitting top for men.

I came to be chosen as the hero in the play. The heroine would be Hashem. We rehearsed hard by the light of the lanterns. Faepsha from our class got the role of the tortured subject. He had rebelled, so, following orders from the zamindar, he was dragged onto the stage with poles under his arms by two footmen. The zamindar was to punish him for his rebellion. Later, we learned that Faepsha had become drunk as he was nervous about the play and he could not walk onto the stage. So this was the only way to get him on. The dramatic effects were certainly enhanced by this though. In those times, though the script was followed closely, some things happened that were not in the script. The zamindar that day was being played by Pota Mamu's son, Kodom Bhai. He was probably angry with Faepsha for some reason. As soon as he got hold of him in the form of a rebellious subject, Kodom Bhai hit Faepsha several times with his wooden shoe. The script never said he was to be beaten that way, but not only did Kodom Bhai beat Faepsha, he also gave him some kicks for good measure. When the footmen pulled Faepsha off the stage, he was actually screaming in pain. Later we saw that Faepsha's back was covered in dried blood where he had been struck with the wooden shoe.

At one point in the play, the hero was terribly sick. He had TB and was dying. He was vomiting blood. All the womenfolk began to cry during this scene. The play ended as the sounds of weeping on the stage mingled with the weeping sounds of the audience. I acted in other plays after this – once in my first year of college and again in my second year. My heroine there was Dr. Syed Altaf's son, Shahid.

We would go around the neighborhood often. One day, we went to Khokon's house which was at the end of Kazi Para. Chachi was in the front yard. She said Khokon was not home and that her daughter was lying inside with a fever. "Go in and see her," she said. I went in, sat by the bed, and put my hand on her forehead. She had a temperature. The girl grabbed my hand and pushed it inside her blouse saying, "Girls have fever down here." I released my hand with difficulty and ran off. A few days later, I visited again. Chachi said the same thing again – Khokon was not home. Then she went off somewhere. I stood wondering about what to do when the girl came outside in a sari. There was a strong breeze and she stood in such a way on purpose that the wind blew the sari to one side to reveal her body. I was deeply embarrassed. The girl commented, "You're no man!" I ran off again. Later, I heard that this girl had got herself into trouble with the vet who rented a room in their house. She was saved this time by a visit to the doctor but she was told that she could never be a mother again. This girl was disgusting – extremely lascivious. She had given me much trouble. At one point she was transported to her brother-in-law's home in Narayanganj.

I did not have much time for play in my childhood as I was busy with work. In Class Eight though, I tried to take part in some games. Once, someone found a football and we would use it to play in Shantala. I used to take part in the game but often, I would not get a chance to do much, especially if it was a competitive sport. You need someone to carry the shoes, the bags, the lemons – I was someone of that sort. I could do such jobs very well and everyone was happy with me, and I would end up doing this for all the big competitions. That was how I got my place in the team. We were heartily welcomed to Shantala and treated to juice and fruits. In the meantime, the rain began to pour. The field became inundated. An hour or two later, we declared that it was impossible to play on this field but the Shantala team replied, "No way! You drank our juice, you ate our fruits, now you must play no matter what."

The ball began to float on the water but we had to play with our feet. It was almost like water polo except we were using our feet, not our hands.

We were seven siblings. We five younger siblings, Mintu, Hasnu, Hasan, Moin, Rekha, and I, had a club. Boro Bhai and Mejho Bhai were excluded because they were older. There was no end to the fun we had together. Later, when I would return from Pakistan, the five of us, again excluding the older two, would be in seventh heaven. We would talk about how to do better in life. I would bring books and read as much as I could. But I never discouraged exercise. I know I will never get this back again but still, occasionally, I grow nostalgic.

It was 1954. I was not in college yet. At that time, there was a radio set at MM College where commentaries on cricket matches would be broadcast. I did not understand cricket, and neither did I understand English, but I would go to listen to the radio sometimes. Some of the students understood quite a bit, and gradually, cricket began to filter into our neighborhood. We had wooden bats and wickets to play with while the ball would be made by winding together some rope. The game would take place in front of Abul Chacha's house. One day, Motiar and I got a chance to bat. Motiar was very strong. He hit the ball so hard that it sped out of the field and onto someone's rooftop. The roof was covered by a gourd plant, and although there were no gourds, there were plenty of flowers and large leaves. The ball disappeared into the leaves and we began to take our runs. The fielding team climbed up on the roof to recover the ball and as they searched, we ran. We got 172 runs that day! This news reached Motiar's uncle, Alim Nazir Chacha's ears, but what he heard was that his nephew was half dead. His condition was similar to the roosters after a cockfight. In fact, both boys were stumbling and running while the others clapped and cheered them on. They were watching the fun but it did not look like the boys would last long.

Alim Nazir Chacha came and dragged Motiar away by the ear while we all ran away as fast as we could. The ball was found the next day when it rolled into the house through a hole in the roof. It should be noted that it was in this year that people were stranded by excessive rain and floods for nearly a month and a half. The Bhoirob River overflowed with koi fish and people went in groups to catch them. Then finally one day when the skies cleared and the sun came out, everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

Once our school Muslim Academy was invited to play football at Shingia. They would pay for our travel by train. If we won, we would get a shield, and if we became runners-up, we would get a cup. We had everything to gain. So I got to Shingia, bag and all, and found that a goat had already been killed, potatoes had been cut, and the dal was already cooking. In short, we were going to have a feast after the game.

The game began almost like a cockfight but neither team scored. Fourteen minutes after halftime, our team scored a goal. And then all we saw was darkness as we began to be clobbered with bamboo poles. We ran helter-skelter, finally meeting up at Rupdia Station, seven miles away. We were all hurt, more or less. When the train arrived, we climbed in and went straight to the hospital as soon as we reached Jessore. I do not remember ever going back to Shingia to play again.

The matriculation exam was coming up and I studied with great fervor. My uncle, Kazi Sir tutored me at night. He was an excellent teacher. He used to tutor Shiuli in Ghop first, then come to tutor me at night. He would lend Shiuli my notes and essays. She would read them and say, "He's your nephew. That's why you think he's smart." Shiuli was very beautiful, almost like Suchitra Sen.[27] She would tilt her head to the

[27] A legendary actress from Calcutta, known for her classic beauty.

left and comb her hair like Suchitra Sen. She was a good student but restless, stubborn and hot-tempered. I heard all this from Kazi Sir. She was an arrogant woman who talked too much.

The matriculation exam took place in 1958. Kamal, Taslim, and I passed in the First Division from Jessore. Shiuli passed in the Second Division. The two of them studied at the same college. The female students sat on separate benches behind a white curtain that the teachers hung across the classroom, so we had to make do with peeping. I never met Shiuli face to face although, once, I met her unknowingly in Islamabad.

In 1957, we received news that my Nani had died. My maternal grandmother had married well and so, when the news of her death spread, many relatives came to see her. People were fainting left and right from their grief at Nani's death. Water was being poured on their heads. Suddenly there was silence. My Boro Nana (Nani's older brother), a calm, tall man with a white beard, white hair, dressed in a white panjabi-pajama and coat, fez hat on his head, had arrived. He came and spoke a few words of which I understood nothing, but everyone lined up in place. Boro Nana began to give instructions calmly and Nani's funeral rites were completed. He said the funeral prayer himself and Nani was buried in the family graveyard. Then he recited numerous prayers and asked everyone to come into the house. He came last of all, and for forty steps, he recited prayers. Slowly, he shut the back door and latched it. For the first time now, tears began to fall from his eyes. That day I learned from him how to control my grief.

I was admitted into MM College after I passed my matriculation exam. I received twenty taka as scholarship and everything else was free. I used to hand over the scholarship money to my father. Everyone said, "Since he's a good student, let him study science. He can be a doctor or an engineer." But I had received high marks in both Bangla papers – seventy-two and seventy-six – and only thirty-seven in math. I did not have a head for math; even so, I ended up studying science – from peer pressure. I was unhappy. I thought, "If only I could study Bangla – or English." A long time later, Inam asked me, "Abbu, you had such good scores in your matric Bangla, History, Geography, why did you go and study science? What would you be if you had studied Bangla?" I had replied, "I'd have recited poetry; I'd have acted in plays; I'd have written poetry, perhaps a novel or short story too. I'd be wearing an ill-fitting panjabi and have a cloth bag hanging by my side. I'd have hair everywhere but my head. But let me become rich first, then I'll write a book or two."

There were many female students with us in college, though they sat separately from us. A white sheet was hung to separate the girls from the boys. The girls would come with the teachers and leave with them. I did not quite enjoy college because I was not too fond of science. One day I got a call. I was to do a part in a play – as the hero. Siddiq Sir was one of the advisors of the drama group. He was the director of the play. The heroine was Shahid. There were so many girls in the college but no one was willing to act. The play went well in spite of this.

During my second year at college, I asked my younger brother Mintu, "Where are the notebooks I had prepared for my matric exam? Return them to me so I can store them away. They may come in handy for someone in the future."

Mintu laughed and replied that he had memorized those notebooks, then sold them to his friends, and used the money to watch movies. All the money was gone. I remembered that this was the Mintu to whom Ma had given ten annas to as a small boy to donate to Jessore's Gorib Pir Shaheb's mausoleum. She sent me with him as watchdog. Mintu dropped the coin through the hole meant for this purpose. Then he took out

a wire and straightened it. Next he bent the end and slid it under the door to pull the coin back out. I was stunned. I asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

He replied, "Ma gave me the money to donate. I did that, did I not? So the coin now belongs to the mausoleum. And those bastards are going to eat it all up. I can't let that happen, so I decided that I will eat with it myself and watch a movie. That's why I pulled the coin out. And remember, I didn't take Ma's money, I took the mausoleum's." I continued to look at him in shock. I thought, "Mintu is a troubled person."

Another time, Mintu and I were confined to the house as punishment. I was thirteen and Mintu (KR Hasan) was twelve. It was a Sunday. Abba was lying inside the room while Mamu snored. Ma was in the kitchen finishing up her work. I was very sad. At one point, Mintu came up to me and whispered, "Open your T-shirt and throw it into the street through the window. And whistle softly. Oh, I forgot, you can't even whistle. Ok, fine. Just try and whistle, and slowly go out of the house, get your T-shirt from the street, and walk like a gentleman to the collectory's field to play football." I said I had a lot of work to do in the evening but he replied that we would be back before then.

We were so engrossed in our game that we only came to our senses when it was already dark. We ran breathlessly home to find that Mamu had created quite a bit of a scene. He was going to take care of those two devils. A bamboo pole adorned his hand at the moment.

In spite of my protests, Mintu began to scream, "Snake, snake!" as he ran into the barn. Mamu, hearing that there was a snake, instantly fainted in the front yard. Everyone became busy with Mamu and, seeing our chance, we slipped indoors and sat on the bed like two innocent chickens. We were saved that day because of Mamu.

There is one more thing I must say about Mintu. The day I went to Abolakanto Mojumdar's house to recite a poem, my younger brother Mintu and Abba were with me. But Mintu's name was not on the list of participants.

When the program began, I recited "Sonar Tori."[28] Suddenly I heard Mintu's name, Kazi Rezaul Hasan (he had kept this name himself), being called. I could not understand how he had managed to get his name on the program. Was there really nothing he could not do?

As soon as his name was announced, he ran to me, handed me a book and a poem, and said, "Prompt me." I went behind the screen and we managed the first few lines quite well. Then came trouble. People began to shout, "You can't do anything! Prompt him properly!"At that, Mintu began to start and stop like a gramophone record. Finally, he rushed to me again, grabbed the book from my hands, and said, "Can't do anything!" as he went back on stage. Anyway, that night, I came first at the poetry recital and won the gold medal, while Mintu was nowhere on the list. He was quite surprised that he had not received a medal, but everyone had really enjoyed the show at his expense.

Boro Bhai, Kazi Anwarul Islam, was the Labor Inspector in Khulna at that time. Mejho Bhai, Kazi Zahidul Islam, was then twenty-two years old and I was eighteen. I had passed my matriculation exam. Mintu, that

[28] A poem by Rabindranath Tagore

is, KR Hasan, was seventeen; my sister, Hasnu, was thirteen; my brother, Hasan, ten; Moin was eight; and our youngest sister, Rekha, was then six. They are all very dear to me.

During Muharram, numerous groups would be formed: Shantala Group, Jhumjhumpur Group, and so on. On the last day of Muharram, the groups would come in processions with their individual tajiyas[29] to the bus stand. An excitment filled the air. When one group arrived, the other group rushed to welcome it. Taleb Bhai would be present through all the ceremonies, sword in hand, encouraging all the groups. My Chchoto Chacha and others were also a part of this. On the day of Muharram, they would twirl loops. Twirling loops meant tying quilts and rags soaked in kerosene to both ends of a stiff wire, lighting them on fire, and twirling these above their heads as they ran. Sparks would land everywhere. Arrangements for alcohol were also made before and after. I have seen bottles in Chchoto Chacha's hands, although he always tried hard to hide them. The Muharram programs never ended before late night. The craziness in the name of Muharram would give rise to many unsocial activities, and the SP and DMs from the police station would be on standby to prevent even more terrible things from happening. The police would guide each group to Doratana Junction, through the different alleys, and back to Doratana again before being escorted away. In spite of this, somewhere or the other, something untoward was bound to happen. I loved the whole event so much that I dreamed of taking Taleb Bhai's place when I grew up. It was no joke to achieve a position like that!

I used to go scouting while I was at Muslim Academy. Scouting camp was kind of mandatory at least once a year. We would travel here and there, and have to stay overnight. During the day, we would indulge in different kinds of physical exercises. We even had a band where we would bang on drums and dhols[30] tunelessly. We had great fun at these scout camps.

Abul Chacha in our neighborhood was a community leader. He would take part in elections and get different positions. Sometimes we could get powdered milk at Abul Chacha's, sometimes potato chips. Cases used to be judged at Abul Chacha's, which I liked and disliked at once. The style of passing judgment was very good – there were no courts, no police, and yet both parties would accept the verdict. Once I had a chance to witness an arbitration. It was a case of a pair of lovers, so during the hearing, the younger children were shooed away. But we entered through the back door and watched. The verdict pronounced was that the man would be beaten with a wooden shoe. Wooden shoes were the norm at that time. Abul Chacha himself began to hit the heroic loverboy while the audience counted. At one point, my Shejho Chacha cried out, "Abul, what's the point of beating him alone? That whore must have been horny too! We should give her a beating or two as well." A roll of laughter went through the audience at Chacha's words while we quickly moved away. But we used that word, "horny," amongst ourselves for a long time.

Mamu used to come and stay at our Jessore house. He had become almost like a member of our family. He used to work at the Chittagong Customs Office and dreamed of becoming filthy rich one day. He had this dream until his dying day. Unfortunately, he could not even get filthy, talk less of filthy rich! He was a thin, small man with a deep voice who loved to chat. I think Abba's sense of humor and Mamu's chattiness were inherited, more or less, by each of us siblings.

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[29] A feretory constructed to imitate the coffin of Imam Hasan and Imam Hussain in a Muharram procession

[30] A traditional drum worn sideways on the neck and beaten with both hands from both sides.

I heard that this Mamu would come to visit our house with forty embroidered panjabis, forty Shantipuri dhotis, and Kashmiri shawls. When the mighty fall, they fall quickly; that is, with a big splat! And when you write the story of your life, some chronology will be lost. The reader just has to make the connections later.

Boro Khalu would also come to visit us. He was deaf but he was very good at bringing everyone together for a great chat session. Looking back, I feel that he was like a character out of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's stories. However, the subject matter of most of Khalu's stories was vomit and the two other similar elements. Here is an example of one of his stories: One night, he and a friend saw a policeman in Calcutta take his cap off, place it to the side, and squat with legs wide apart. So they put a certain something into the cap before running off a little distance to throw stones at the policeman. As expected, the policeman jumped up and pulled his cap over his head. And of course, the result was quite predictable.

And from Moreli in Jessore would visit Sodu Chacha and Begumbu with their eight or ten children. It was great fun when they came. I used to visit them in Moreli and stay overnight too. Even the Moulvi from my maternal grandparents' home in Poygram Kashba would come to visit us. Chchoto Khala would visit from Nihalpur in 24 Pargana Khaspur. She even gave birth in our house. Chchoto Khalu would come too. We actually called Chchoto Khalu Shejho Khalu because he had been married to our Shejho Khala. After her death, he married Chchoto Khala. He was an aristocrat and a politician who was a great conversationalist.

The Eid Jamaat during our time would be held at Niaz Park. A Pakistani officer named Niaz had built this park next to the Collectorate Office. So it was named after him. Almost everyone in Jessore would gather here for the Eid prayer. Even the DM and SP would come here for their prayers. During Eid, everyone donned new clothes and shoes according to their means to come for the prayer. At that time, Bata sold red keds for children, priced at two taka and fifteen paisa. The new shoes would soon induce blisters, so they would climb up into our hands. We held our shoes in one hand and a red popsicle in the other. Afterwards, there would be big red spots on our clothes.

The graveyard was in Karbala. Ahad Bhai, that is, Ahad Contractor from Jessore, had bought a lot of land and donated it for the graveyard. He was a large-hearted, selfless person. But the Imam's voice at Karbala began to grow stronger when Ayub Khan seized power and declared martial law in '54. An ironed turban from the washerman's adorned his head now as he held a pipe in his hand that served as a megaphone. He regularly began wearing a long gown and pajamas. He had quite a loud voice, and going from neighborhood to neighborhood, he would scream, "All you whippersnappers, make a procession and get to the meeting!" He yelled out slogans in his coarse voice and incited all the young children to go with him for the first time to Niaz Park.

The Pakistani General Omrao Khan was present there and, to suck up to the man, the mad Moulvi began to scream strange slogans in his horrible voice – *Long live Ayub Khan! Long live Omrao Khan! Long live Pakistan! Naraye takbir!* and so on while the young boys echoed his slogans. I did not understand then, but later realized that that was the beginning of many a rajakar's[31] life in that region.

[31] People who betrayed Bangladesh from within are known as rajakars or traitors

Around this time, Mejho Bhai came of age. He began to watch movies and sing songs, even have an affair or two. He copied Dilip Kumar's hairstyle after watching the movie *Azaad*. Unfortunately, when Abba saw him, he grabbed Mejho Bhai by the hair and immediately put a stop to it. We had strict orders to return home before dark but Mejho Bhai committed a cardinal error. Abba opened the front door and landed a fist on Mejho Bhai's nose. Abba, being a Swadeshi, knew how to box. This was the result. In spite of such occasional misdemeanors, Mejho Bhai was the life of the house and he could manage Abba and Ma quite well. He would grab the *Moksedul Mominin*[32] and sound out a beautiful azaan. He entranced Ma and, in the process, temporarily covered up his misdeeds. My parents' aim in life was to educate their children – all nine of us siblings. We lost Arun as a child and later, Moin, during the Liberation War of '71. Moin was a fourth year BSc student at the time. Besides these two, the rest of us became graduates. Each of us has been able to make a mark in our particular field. Our two sisters were married off into good families. The credit for our current positions in life all goes to our parents, and especially to our mother's tireless labor and dreams for us. She worked very hard to make us what we are today. Ma kept a strict eye on what we were studying. We were instructed to read out loud. When I objected, Ma said, "You will see with your eyes and hear with your ears – this way, everything will be embedded in your mind for life." So we would read out loud for Ma because, like all children, we believed we were studying for our parents. We did not do it for us. In short, my mother was highly ambitious. But in spite of this, my mother lived for Allah in Heaven and her husband on earth. There was discipline in our home, without any abuse. So why would we not be well-brought up?

In 1958, the commander-in-chief of the Pakistani Army, Muhammad Ayub Khan, declared martial law. Our matriculation exam results had just been published. Martial law was a scary idea, so we all stayed home although Mejho Bhai went out alone that day, and on the morning after. He came home and declared that no one would be allowed to go out until they passed the saluting test. I had never heard of a saluting test before but Mejho Bhai demonstrated how we were to march forward, halt, and raise our hand in salute. Practice went on for quite some time. Then the test began. I was first, and I passed. Mintu and Hasnu passed too, but Hasan failed. Then it was Moin's turn. When Moin came out of the house, we saw that he was in polished shoes, knee-high socks, with a white shirt tucked into his pants. He strutted out to Mejho Bhai's chair – or rather, according to his orders, his seat of authority – then walked straight past. Then he stopped and announced that he was against martial law. We were stunned by his declaration. How did that little kid hear about martial law and how did he even know how to pronounce the words? How did he think to rebel and declare that he did not accept it?! And whether the martial law ended in our country or not, Mejho Bhai's martial law was certainly terminated after this incident.

Abba never said much about anything to anyone. If he disliked something, he would return home with a stormy expression on his face. He would come home and sit on the veranda or perform his ablution. We knew from his actions that things had not gone according to his liking. For instance, there was the '47 declaration of independence on August 14 and the martial law of '58. He never spoke of it to anyone though.

Abba was full of humor. His words were always laced with a joke or some form of humor. He read a lot – he had memorized Shakespeare. Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Milton, the Russian authors and the Greeks were all at his fingertips. He would tell us some of the stories and ask us to read them. Sometimes

[32] A handy reference book used by Muslims

he would determine when we were to read certain stories. Abba was one of the few Muslims members of the Jessore Institute before 1940. And not only that, he was the only Muslim among the forty members to attend the Moonlight Convention of the Jessore Institute. People would recite their own poetry – some even coming from Calcutta to do so. Each would bring his own food but Abba would have to sit separately while the others sat together. Some of the Hindu members disliked this system and one day, they declared that they would eat with Abba. The rest refrained. I heard that after this incident the Moonlight Convention never took place again.

Then arrived the Pakistani movies, like *Khyber Pass*. Nilo, the oversized actress, stood with her legs apart while the Khyber Mail train passed through the gap. Disgusting. Then came *Daal Mein Kala, Dil Meri Dharkan Teri, Kalapani, Nehle Pe Dehle, Wah Bhai Wah, Rangeela*, and so on. One movie stood out – *Fanne Khan*. There were huge audiences for these shows. The thing is, everyone was Fanne Khan in their personal lives. The actors in these Pakistani movies were Santosh Kumar, Shudhir, Sabiha, and other such famous people. Nurjahan had moved on into singing. The cultural world in Jessore was already quite strong, and to this was added the cinema which gained momentum after the fifties. I watched a movie or two with my parents but then they stopped going to the theater. I remember Abba giving me one taka after I passed the matriculation exam with which Kamal and I went to the Bengal Talkies Cinema to watch the Uttam-Suchitra[33] starrer *Shaapmochon*. We loved it. I came home and narrated the whole story to Abba. Then I told others. There was Rahela Bhabi who lived a couple of houses away to whom I narrated the story. After listening to me, my beautiful sister-in-law smiled naughtily and said, "Shombhu, I've seen the movie but I didn't see Uttam-Suchitra get married. They merely embraced at the end. So, where did you get the idea of marriage from?" Rahela Bhabi was naughty to the core. But one day, she, with her paan-zarda[34]-chewing husband, left for their village. I was deeply hurt.

I saw many more movies besides these, even Hindi movies starring Dilip Kumar-Nargis, Raj Kapoor, Ashok Kumar, Madhubala, Nadira, and many others. There was Basant Kumar in Bangali cinema. But later, in '65, Indian movies were banned. So I watched only English movies in West Pakistan although cinema in East Pakistan had begun with *Mukh o Mukhosh*. But I never forgot Uttam-Suchitra's *Shaapmochon*.

Boro Bhai got married on 15 November 1958 at the age of twenty-four. The girl was from Bagerhaat, just sixteen or seventeen years of age. We heard that if Boro Bhai got married, it would be helpful for Ma because now Boro Bhabi could take care of the household chores. But my Boro Bhabi did not know how to do anything, not even roll out the dough for the flat bread. She was the oldest of three daughters of a forest officer and the question of working had never even come up for her. Bhabi picked up some tips from my work while she was in Jessore for a few days, then, when Abba conceded defeat to his loud arguments, Boro Bhai left with her for Khulna. Boro Bhai was the father of five children by the time he was thirty-one. I thought then, as I thought later, that Boro Bhai should not have married at twenty-four. He should have waited another ten years. The same thing happened with Mejho Bhai. I fell in love in '65 and got married in '69 when I was twenty-nine, by which time everyone was almost grown.

[33] The iconic duo of Indian Bangali cinema
[34] Betel leaf and chewing tobacco

Let me get back to my earlier thoughts. Kashem Sir at my college was a small, chubby man. One day, we saw coming towards us, a tall man with long hair, no fat whatsoever on his body, with a flute and drawing paper in his hands. We heard that his name was SM Sultan, an artist. One day, a few of us walked towards his room. We gave the door a gentle push – and saw no one. There was bedding on the floor. Later on, I learned a lot about SM Sultan. I have quite a number of his paintings in my house.

As I was leaving the college one day, I saw someone sitting, wrapped in a shawl. When I drew closer, he said, "I'm Joglu."

I said, "Why are you sitting like this?"

He replied, "Don't come near me. I have leprosy. Your exams are coming up."

I said, "So what?"

He said, "No one wants me. They've all thrown me out."

I said, "How about you come to my house?"

So I brought him home, and at one point, I told Abba the story. There was a room for worthless things a couple of houses down from ours. I had rented it and lived there by myself. Abba had said, "Ok, he can stay there until your exams. Bring another bed and give him food. Have a separate plate, bowl, and glass for him. The disease is contagious – you may be affected."

Joglu left after the exams. Quite some time later, I met him on the road to Khulna. He recognized me as did I. I asked, "Joglu, what happened to that disease of yours?"

Joglu replied, "I didn't really have leprosy. There was just too much sulfur in my body."

We did get a slight advantage from the martial law – Abba became the Head Clerk at the Jessore Collectorate. Perhaps it would have happened anyway because he was a good worker. Abba was given a separate office and one day, I demanded to be taken to see it. Abba told me to go during my vacation. When I went, I saw that Abba had a separate desk and chair with a shelf for files and papers. The rest of the employees sat in front in two rows. A manually operated fan moved overhead. I was amazed. Samad Chacha was there too. He was Abba's subordinate but Abba thought of him as a friend and even a brother. Samad Chacha later became the father-in-law of Concord's Kamal. Then there was Anwar Chacha, an astonishing man.

The new young magistrate said that he could not marry his dark and fat sister off. His sister had a BA degree and was adept at housework. The magistrate said, "Anwar Shaheb, please find me a boy."

Anwar Chacha came into the office and said to Shafiq, "You're not married yet, so next Sunday, you'll marry the magistrate's sister." Shafiq packed up and fled his Puratan Kashba mess-building as soon as he heard this. So on the following Monday, Anwar Chacha got hold of Helal from work and was satisfied only after the boy was married off to the magistrate's sister. Anwar Chacha, in his declining days, went to see a girl for his son's wedding and ended up marrying her himself. He was a cheerful, selfless, and kind-hearted man.

When Ayub Khan visited Jessore, many were impressed. Others praised him as well. Many happily said, "This is what you look like if you're to be the president of a country! Tall and broad, with a gray mustache. How gorgeous!" Of course, then I did not understand so much. Later when I did, I learned that the Bangalis were not independent for a long time. We served foreigners. We became used to foreign rule and rulers. So when Ayub began to rule us, we accepted happily. But this happiness did not last long because, within a few days, our college was taken over by a wave of politics. The communists had so far been acting secretly but now they came out into the open. Student leaders from Dhaka University also began to arrive. We began to hear a different tune and our joy quickly dissolved. I was, however, not involved in politics yet, because, I thought, to do so I needed to study a lot and gain knowledge, and I needed funds. I didn't have time for that then. I needed to establish myself. So I read my textbooks and any other books I could find. And then there was work. I kept thinking about what I would happen next, what I would do. It would be hard to get financial support from home for higher studies. I would have to manage something for myself. I was preoccupied with these thoughts at the time.

Abba read books all his life, so Ma even had Kiriti Roy detective novels in her collection. Mintu would lie in wait and when he saw Ma had almost finished the book, he would read the final lines and say, "Ma, can I tell you what happens at the end of the book you're reading? Then you won't have to take the trouble of reading the rest of it." Ma would cry and implore, "Son, please don't do that! Just tell me what you want." Mintu would ask for twelve annas and say, "I'll go to the cinema while you read your book." I won't be able to do justice to how much Mintu loved Ma to her dying day.

The exams were over and the results were out. My results were commendable. One day Boro Bhai brought a paper cutting home from Khulna and I saw a way to escape. Twenty-seven cadets were to be recruited at the PMA. It was a question of becoming an army officer. I toyed with the paper cutting for a time and thought about meeting with a couple of people about it. I began inquiring about it when Boro Bhai brought home another cutting, this time about a scholarship. This was also army-related, but first I'd have to study engineering at Lahore Engineering College. Then I would need to go to the Pakistan Military Academy for a commission. There would be no cost to study. Besides, I'd get a job as soon as I finished studying. I'd have to work in the army for seven years. I was quite excited.

In the meantime, I learned that Jamil Bhai had come. He was Captain at the time, so I went to see him with the two pieces of paper. He looked at the first piece of paper and exclaimed, "Are you crazy? Why would you become a normal army officer? Look at us. God knows what will happen to us after we retire. Apply for this civilian scholarship scheme. You'll get it. First become an engineer – it's only a matter of four years. Then you can serve your commission for seven years and come out a winner. You'd be an engineer and, on top of that, an army officer. Go, go and apply."

Mannan Bhai was in the army too. He came home and I consulted him. He encouraged me as well and spent some time talking to me about the army.

I applied. When I was summoned, I went to Dhaka – by train, by steamer, then by train again. We all knew Chapabu lived on Ram Krishna Mission Road near the Ittefaq office. Everyone stayed there when they came to Dhaka. So I went there too. Later, I learned that others would arrive like this at Chapabu's and still did. I went for my interview at the Cantonment from there. A bus went from Gulistan to the Cantonment, four times a day at the most. By the time the bus headed off from Gulistan and reached

Farmgate, all the seats were empty. The roads were empty on both sides except for a house with a sculpture on the left. Then, leaving the airport on the left, we entered the Cantonment. Even inside the cantonment, there was nothing on either side of the road. There was only a gas station on the left and a small building that looked like a store. On the right were the headquarters of the fourteen divisions with a tin shed opposite. Movies were apparently shown there sometimes. I had my interview there. I got my result that very afternoon. I had survived. So I got back on the bus and returned to Chapabu's. The medical test would take place two days later. So in the evening, I took a stroll around the City. Henu, that is Farida Huq, Chapabu's daughter and Barrister Rafiq's wife, took me to the medical college. I applied for admission and my name came up second. But who would pay for me to study at a medical college for five or six years? So I gave up thoughts of studying here. Chapabu took me out too. And then there was Khokon, Chapabu's son – a very good boy. He took good care of me, chatting, and even sleeping with me at night. He showed me how Manik Mia, Mosharraf Shaheb, and others sat on the veranda to eat; how the Ittefaq printing press worked, and so on. He also showed me how people were stealing the papers. He took me to the second floor to show me how the cars moved in and out. He could even name each of the cars. I listened to him, amazed. One day, he said, "The Queen of England came to visit Adamjee." At that time, any foreigner visiting Dhaka was taken to see the Adamjee Jute Mill. Thanks to the Queen's visit, the roads were repaired nicely. I had my medical checkup in the meantime. The CMH then was merely an L-shaped tin shed, with only a few beds. The Army doctor was from Punjab. He embarrassed me thoroughly. I had no idea that a medical checkup to join the army could be like this. No one had ever told me. Shortly, I learned that I had passed. There was someone else with me – Nazimuddin from Gendaria – he passed too.

One day, as I strolled around, I saw Shahbagh Hotel from the outside. Further on, I saw a company named McDonald constructing a building. Later, I heard that it was going to be a big hotel (now the Sheraton Hotel). Then I returned to Tikatuly. Now it was time for the inter-service selection board. This used to take place previously in Kohat in West Pakistan. This was the first time it would be held in Dhaka. There were two or three tin sheds to the right of the Signals Battalion at the very end of the present cantonment. There were some fields – the rest was wilderness. Foxes would howl after dark. We were taken to stay there. For two days and two nights, we stayed. Lots of physical workouts, lots of other things. I was physically quite fit, so I didn't have any problem. We also had an intelligence test sometime during this period. I passed that too. Then I returned. We were told that, pass or fail, we would be notified. I stayed in Tikatuly for a couple of days, then returned to Jessore by train. It took twenty-eight hours to reach Jessore.

A few days later, I was summoned. On the day I was to leave, my mother lay in bed, hugging me to her, and cried. She loved me so much, but still I had to go. I received Abba's blessings and set off. Mintu, Hasnu, Hasan, Moin, and Rekha came with me. Mejho Bhai was our guardian. As soon as we crossed the airport boundary, my five siblings began to bawl in chorus. It was truly sad. I headed off to Dhaka on my way to Lahore. Mejho Bhai came to Dhaka from Jessore, bringing with him an employee of PIA.[35] Again, we put up at Chapabu's home in Tikatuly. She took us to the old town to watch a movie – *Pothe Holo Deri*. A Suchitra-Uttam starrer.

[35] Pakistan International Airlines – the national carrier of Pakistan.

At the end of this chapter about my childhood, I must confess one fact though. I did not really have a complete childhood. I was an adult at six, but I don’t have any regrets. I don’t know why but I find life very enjoyable. I am happy within my heart and beyond it. I think everyone should experience this inner joy sometime.

Chapter Two

Academic Life at Lahore Engineering College and University

The next day, I set off on a plane to Lahore. It took six hours to get there from Dhaka. The free food on the plane tasted good. Mejho Bhai had handed me over to a subedar at the Dhaka airport. When we landed, I discovered that thirty or forty men and women were waiting to receive that subedar in Lahore, all because a Punjab subedar was taking up a permanent posting in West Pakistan. Everyone was overjoyed and greeted him with garland after garland. I stood to one side and watched.

After the ceremony, the subedar said to the men and women, "Please leave. This civilian scholar was entrusted to me. I must see him to his destination, and then I'll take a taxi back."

And so it was. He took me in a taxi to the EME unit of the ten divisions at RA Bazaar. A Bangali from Sylhet was in charge of the mess. Straightaway he announced, "There's no space for things like this." The subedar grumbled as he took me to the clerical mess of the ten divisions. There were lots of Bangalis there. They were all very happy to see me and the subedar went away happily as well. His house was in Shekhopura, nearly twenty miles away. Getting me dinner at night, taking me around to see the cargo road, helping me set up my cot for the night – the mess members all pitched in enthusiastically.

The next day was Sunday. After lunch, two people accompanied me on a horse-drawn cart. It took a while and by the time we arrived, it was late afternoon. There were three halls, D, E, and F. I was taken to F Hall. After some discussion, a civilian scholar named Selim Khan Pathan was discovered. Pathan happily took me in. I thanked my two companions profusely and said goodbye. Selim Khan gave me a room. Here everyone had a room to himself. Then he went downstairs. I was introduced to many and I spoke both English and Urdu unhesitatingly, much to their amusement. I'd brought bananas and everyone shared them excitedly.

Selim Khan then took me to the hostel mess. After dinner, he brought me back and said, "Finish whatever you need to do because I'm going to lock you in your room. There will be a ragging of the new arrivals. They will tear you apart. You just arrived today, so you won't be able to stand it." And indeed, there was a hullabaloo in the hostel all night, but I slept through most of it.

Selim Khan took me to the registrar's office the next day. I filled out a lot of forms but the trouble began when I had to pay the two hundred and twenty taka for admission. The money was refundable but I didn't have the amount with me then. I showed Selim Khan the ten taka I had. He sat down with his hands on his head. Then, leaving me there, he went to the bank, got the money, and had me admitted. The next day, he told me that there were Bangalis in D hostel and that there was a room available. He said, "Let me take you there. You'll feel better." So I went and became a resident of D Hostel.

The first class was a workshop. This was my first time at a workshop. There was an Englishman named Miller in charge. He had come as a teacher from UNESCO, but before that, he had been with Rolls Royce. We were still outside the classroom, waiting for him. Before he arrived though, a small man appeared on a bicycle – good-looking, with thick hair. He parked the bicycle in a designated spot and came straight to me. He said, "I am Jahangir Nasrullah from Lahore." I replied, "I am Kazi Shahid from Jessore." After our introductions, he proceeded to introduce me to many others in the class.

Lunch was at noon. The rest of the classes were from one to four, followed by prayer at dusk and dinner in the dining hall. I moved my books around, then went to sleep. I woke to see physical training going on out on the field. Nearly everyone from the three hostels was on the field. I got ready. I had my PT shoes with me, so I donned my half shirt and shorts. I had brought these from Jessore. After class eight in Jessore, I had begun to do yoga in addition to walking and running as well as push-ups and other physical exercises. I also did weight-lifting and other such athletics. We used to do these exercises at an akhra[36] abandoned by the Hindus in Jessore. So I had no trouble doing the PT at Lahore Engineering College. Except for Sundays, PT took place every day with some time devoted to running.

The Annex block was nearby. The main block was a little further away, but within walking distance. I would run past the Annex block, around GT Road and return to the hostel. Four rounds of this made a mile and a half to a two-mile run. There were a lot of sports to play at this college: hockey, cricket, football, basketball, volleyball. There were nine courts just for tennis. And innumerable clubs. There was even a club for mountain climbing. There was a club for kayaking on the Ravi River. But there was one thing missing – a pond or swimming pool. In Lahore, I learned that there was something called a swimming pool when Jahangir Nasrullah took me to a swimming club. There were swimming pools also at Aitchison College and Mintu Park. In that park is the 1940 Pakistan Resolution column with Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq's name on it.

I began to swim at the Aitchison College swimming pool but there was one problem. There was a separate time blocked for the white men and women. Locals were barred from swimming during that time. One day I came up with a tricky idea. After planning it with Jahangir Nasrullah, his brother Omar Nasrullah and several other friends – all from Punjab University and Lahore Medical and Engineering College – we rushed in and jumped into the pool when the whites were swimming in it. When they saw us jump in, they frantically climbed out and ran. Of course, the consequences were dire, but the barrier between the whites and the locals was lifted. Now anyone could swim whenever they wanted.

There were regular inter-university or college swimming competitions – with prizes. One such tournament took place at Punjab University swimming pool. We joined in. I wouldn't be allowed to compete as I hadn't quite reached that level. After all, how far could a swimmer from the Royal Pond at Purono Kashbah in Kazipara go? However, before the relay race, one of the swimmers came down with a high fever, and I was persuaded to go in for the breaststroke. I had been trained a little. In fact, I had been trained for all the events. Jahangir would take me. I was taught freestyle, backstroke, and breaststroke – there were three strokes. I was told to jump in at number three. I did – and completed my turn. Our team from Punjab University came second. I learned that this was the first time in a hundred years that Punjab University had won second place in this event. They had always come first. It was my fault but in spite of this, I received much praise. I even got a prize and there was much laughter all around.

Saber Parvez lived in the room next to mine. There was Mohammad Ali next to him. Saber Parvez was the son of a civil surgeon in Lahore and Mohammad Ali the son of a landed farmer. Working the land was their profession. When his father came to campus, he would dress in large turban, *churidar-pajama*, *shalwar-kamiz*, sandals, and so on. I had visited their home. Mohammad Ali had taken me. We had to pass through about a mile of an orange grove. Saber Parvez also took me to his home one day. It was a

[36] A space typically used by Hindus for yoga and other physical activities; a gymnasium

large house with a huge compound. These houses had been built for the British. This was the first time I saw a drawing room. It was decorated with a carpet, curtains, cots, cushions, a chandelier, and sofas. The dining room was also decorated likewise, but the food was very simple. The Punjabis are not big eaters. We had hand-made rotis[37] with potatoes, meat and some vegetables. Then some fruit. After that, some drank tea. His parents wanted to know about East Pakistan. I told them what I knew.

One of our teachers was a well-known head of department, Dr. Azgar Hamid. And our Math teacher was Mr. Quraishi. Dr. Azgar Hamid's classmate was the Nobel Laureate Abdus Salam. Dr. Azgar Hamid and Mr. Quraishi used to teach at the Islamia College in Calcutta. After the partition, they both came to Lahore Engineering College. Dr. Azgar Hamid was a good teacher, ethical and principled. He was always immersed in his work. He could work from morning till dark and even stay for any program that went on till late. He never left until all the students did. And even though he had the college car for transport, he would ride his bicycle with his groceries from the market in front of Shalimar Garden in Bhogobanpur. It was about a mile. One day, we said to him, 'Sir, we have a chemistry class in the Annex Block right after your class. We cannot cover the distance in five minutes. It's hard.' He quickly whipped a calculator out. We were not allowed to use calculators but he calculated to show us how many hours we would miss in a year if the break was increased to ten minutes. He advised us to run to our next class, because, as he pointed out, after sitting in a class, it would be healthy to take a five minute run.

Quraishi Shaheb would explain math to us and say, 'There is nothing to discover in math. Math came into being because everything about it has been discovered. If you do discover something, you'll get the Nobel Prize. So you must practice math, memorize math. If you fail math, you will fail in every subject in engineering.'

And that's what happened to Amanullah. The Urdu-speaking Amanullah had come from East Pakistani. He lived on the floor below ours and slept a lot. When the exam results were published, he was found to have failed fourteen subjects. Dr. Quraishi said, 'Didn't I tell you that anyone who fails math will fail everything else?'

Every month we had to go to the cantonment. That's where we would receive the hundred and twenty taka scholarship money as well as our books and stationery. The course at Lahore Engineering College was three years long. Later, when it became West Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology, it became a four-year program. In other words, we were the first batch in this four-year program. The costs at an engineering college or university, however, were high. The cost to become an engineer in four years during the sixties was nearly eighty thousand taka. A huge affair. This money came from the people's taxes. West Pakistanis paid the taxes – as did the East Pakistanis, but the money benefitted only West Pakistan. This was because among the twenty-five civilian scholars, twenty-four were West Pakistanis. I was the only one from East Pakistan. This was the case for everything.

One hundred and twenty taka was a lot of money. Everything was free except for food, clothes, and haircuts. I saved twenty taka at the end of the month after all my expenditures. When I went home for the holidays, I bought clothes for Hasnu, Hasan, Moin, and Rekha, and a return ticket on PIA for two hundred and twenty taka.

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[37] Flatbeard

There was a man from Mymensingh in Lahore called Akhter Shaheb. One day, Kamal Laskar Shaheb, Zaman Bhai, Bulu Bhai, Mowla Bhai and I went to visit him. His home was made of tin, like a barrack. He was previously at our Engineering College but he left it for EME (Electrical, Mechanical Engineering) core but he was planning to change to Artillery. He never minced words and smoked a pipe. He sat with us. Bhabi sat with their two-month-old in her lap. A nice family. Lunch was soon prepared, and, of course, Bangalis meant Bangali food. We chatted quite a bit and returned to the college later in the afternoon. This visit and food soon became a part of our monthly routine.

One Sunday morning, the window was open. It wasn't quite winter yet. I heard someone calling from below, "Shombhu, Shombhu." I was surprised to hear someone calling me by my nickname here in a foreign country and looked out of the window to see Mannan Bhai from Jessore on a Vespa! When he saw me, he called up to me, "Get dressed quickly and come. I want to take you to my home."

It was really nice to hear him call like this. I got ready quickly and climbed onto the back of the Vespa. After a long ride, Mannan Bhai stopped his Vespa in front of a house and said, "This is my home."

I looked around to see one or two houses of the same style spread over a large area. The British used to live in these houses before. They rode horses and needed a lot of space for them. So the houses had a lot of empty space around them. But it was quite lonely here, with a very desolate look to it. It would be difficult to live in a place like this, especially for a chatty Bangali. I felt even worse after seeing Mannan Bhai's wife. Who knew how this seventeen or eighteen year old lived in this emptiness! Bhabi was very pleased to see me. Mannan Bhai went in to wash up and asked me to do the same. Riding a Vespa in a dusty country as this did nothing for one's face! A little later, one by one, the Bangalis came. Some had tea and left, others stayed. I remember one person in particular. He was Major Shamsuzzaman. He spoke forcefully. He sounded as though he would beat up the Punjabis any chance he got. I had no idea why. Mannan Bhai merely laughed at his words. Lunch was a splendid affair. Mannan Bhai had done the shopping himself before going to pick me up. I realized that he invited people to rid himself of his monotonous life. After lunch, Mannan Bhai asked, "Do you want to hear songs? I have Hindu devotional songs." He really had an open mind.

He placed the record on the player. It was a rare pleasure to hear the *Shyama sangeet* in such wild country. Later we played cards. This went on till dark when we had tea and snacks. I had classes the following day, so Mannan Bhai gave me a ride back to the hostel on his Vespa. But this was not the end. For as long as Mannan Bhai was in Lahore, he would often pick me up and drop me off. I never had to go by bus. Later on, they moved to a house in Sadar Bazar. There were more people here, more trees, even one or two cars. The marketplace was close by but it was rather dusty. It was better for Bhabi though. She could at least see one or two faces. I've even stayed overnight at this house. Whenever Mannan Bhai had night duty or had to be away for a day or two, he would ask me to stay over. I would sit on the verandah and chat with Bhabi about different things. Quite often, I would say, "I won't be in the army for too long. I will have my own business. I'll build industries. I'll be rich, you know, Bhabi. Don't you see how these West Pakistanis exert power with their money? I'll also make money and be powerful."

Bhabi would laugh. She would say, "Where there's a will, I'm sure you'll find a way."

Apart from this, I began to receive invitations from different places. Civilian scholars were invited to only once a year to the EME Mess in RA Bazar. After receiving a commission in the army, many people would

come to study engineering from EME at our Engineering Institute. That was allowed then. Three such students were admitted with us, of whom Ejaz was one. One day he took me somewhere where the tables were all rather tall with stools next to them. We had to climb up on to the stools. Ejaz sat me down, popped open a tin container and said, "Drink." Thinking it was some kind of sweet juice, I took a sip. Immediately I put the tin down, ran outside and rinsed my mouth out. Everyone laughed. Later, I heard that that was beer.

Every week I received a letter from Abba. Mejho Chacha wrote in between. Chapabu also wrote once in a while. I replied dutifully. Boro Bhai sent a letter sometimes but that was to remind me over and over not to forget to bring back the suit and tie that he had lent me when I returned from Lahore. Once he had lent me a camera. I returned it within a year after being attacked by letter after letter about it.

At that time, few Bangalis went to West Pakistan. During the sixties, there were probably fifty or sixty Bangalis. There was a card game called "Dukki" that was popular among the Bangalis. "Dukki" meant two. The number two was the joker. If three cards matched, all you had to do was add a two and you'd have a game. I played it a couple of times but could not really get into it. But a chess board and pieces were found. This game stayed with Kamal Lasker. Sometimes we would play late into the night, continuing even after checkmate. We would discover only later that we had already had a checkmate – that was the standard of our game!

Rashid Khan gradually became my friend. One Sunday, he came to pick me up to go meet his mother, driving his Mercedes himself. After a long drive when we arrived at the car verandah of a huge house, someone came running to take the car's keys. I looked around to see more cars of the same type. Rashid's mother came down the stairs and proceeded to hug and kiss me on the cheeks. I was taken aback. I was not only not used to such a style of welcome, I hadn't ever heard of it either. She kissed Rashid Khan in the same way. It looked as though they had seen each other after a long time and yet he had only gone off this morning from this house to pick me up.

Rashid's mother took my hand and led me to the drawing room upstairs. It was a beautiful room decorated with expensive furniture. She asked me to sit and said, "I've heard a lot about you from Rashid. He likes you very much. You're from East Pakistan and he's very interested in East Pakistan." She spoke in English.

And, as she had said, Rashid Khan peppered me with questions about East Pakistan. My knowledge was limited, so how much could I tell him? I told him what I knew. During our conversation, Rashid Khan told me that they had a zamindari in the tribal area of Waziristan. Everyone knew them there, and they were, in effect, princes there.

He did not take the driver on the return trip either because it was difficult to talk. We left Gulbagh and entered the cantonment. We rounded Mall Road and crossed the junction to come to a halt in front of a house. I saw a nameplate in Bangla: Major General Khwaja Wasiuddin, GOC, 10th Division. He said, "Khwaja Wasiuddin is our relative by marriage. But there are no Pakistanis in this house apart from my relatives. They are all Bangalis. His ADC is also Bangali. Captain Lasker from Sylhet. The batman, cook, driver, gardener – everyone's a Bangali." He drove on and continued, "This is the only place at which there is Bangla." He looked at me as he spoke. Then he asked, "Did you study Urdu?" I said, "Until my

matriculation. I even took the exam and passed." He said, "Do you know that not one letter of your alphabet is taught here?" I replied, "I know."

"Listen, Shahid," said Rashid. "There will be no Pakistan. There cannot be. As far as I know, we, especially the Punjabis, have nothing in common with you, except religion. The same religion exists in many Middle Eastern countries too. But that does make them all one country? The day Urdu came into use in your East Pakistan, Bangla should have begun here too. They didn't do that. So Pakistan cannot stay together. In fact, we should not be able to stay in West Pakistan. We have nothing in common with these people. The Sindhs have nothing in common with them." I could hear the anger in Rashid's voice.

Soon it was winter. There was a boy named Ehsan from Pindi in our hostel. He was tall, fair, and skinny. We soon became friends. He told me he would take me home with him during our vacation in December.

We got on the night train from Lahore Station and reached Pindi at dawn. Ehsan's two-storied house, surrounded by a wall, was located in the old part of Pindi. An old man opened the door for us. I thought he might be Ehsan's grandfather but I soon realized my mistake. The man was Ehsan's father. Ehsan had probably written to him already about me and our visit. The old man graciously took me inside. We sat in the drawing room. There was a fireplace with a fire burning in it. Ehsan's older brother came in. He was a well-known lawyer. Ehsan's mother also came in. It was obvious that she had been quite a beauty in her days.

A little later, Ehsan took me to wash up. For breakfast we had paratha with eggs and mutton with tea. This was my first encounter with parathas in Pakistan. Once I had mentioned to Ehsan that we didn't only eat rice, we ate parathas too. I understood that the story had travelled here. After eating, Ehsan showed me a room on the second floor. I was to stay in this room alone. It was quite a large room and also had a fireplace. We came downstairs again. Ehsan's father was still sitting there. Ehsan took me to the verandah and said, "Since Pitaji is still sitting there, it means he wants to tell you a story. You have a golden opportunity to live in this house long-term with the excuse of listening to his stories. Or you could look at it as the price you have to pay for staying in this house. I'm rather sleepy, brother. I need to sleep a little."

I had no desire to sleep at this odd hour and, instead, was interested in listening to stories. I returned to the drawing room. Tea was served again. Yasin Shaheb asked me to put more wood into the fireplace. Ehsan wrapped a blanket around his father and went off to sleep. I made myself comfortable too. Yasin Shaheb asked if I had any problem, whether I was sleepy, did I need anything else, and so on. I replied, "No. Everything is fine. I will sit here with you now."

I listened to Yasin Shaheb's stories till it was nearly afternoon. The gentleman had been in the English Army in the Supply Core. He became a sergeant fairly quickly. He was an expert at riding horses and was a teacher at the training center in Pindi. He was young, strong, and handsome (he didn't have to tell me this – it was obvious to me. He looked like a westerner). His commanding officer was a British named Robert. Yasin Shaheb soon became a favorite of this officer. The officer was impressed by Yasin Shaheb's expertise with horses. One day the officer took Yasin Shaheb home to introduce him to his daughter Helen Zareen. He wanted Helen to learn to ride and asked Yasin Shaheb to train her.

A commanding officer's wish is like a command. So every Sunday, Yasin Shaheb began to show Helen how to ride a horse. But, in the midst of this, Helen fell in love with him. Helen was a beauty and young

too. How could a young man like Yasin reject her advances? So the inevitable happened. Yasin Shaheb began to take Helen riding to their farm houses in Pindi sometimes. Helen liked the farm houses very much. Then one day, he took Helen home to introduce her to his parents and other members of his family. Later, after dropping Helen home, he returned and realized that his parents were worried about his relationship with Helen. The lessons and meetings at the farm house continued nevertheless. A few days later, Helen became pregnant. Keeping this a secret, Helen told her father, Robert, that she wanted to marry Yasin. The Englishman nearly went mad when he heard his daughter's words, but he did not react too much in front of her. Helen told Yasin Shaheb about the situation. Yasin Shaheb already had an idea about the British mindset and so he waited anxiously to see what lay in store for him. Suddenly, one day, without any warning, Yasin Shaheb was bundled onto a train and brought straight to Calcutta by Commander Robert.

Then he was shipped off to Burma by an officer and two soldiers of his own battalion. Burma was still under British rule at the time and Yasin Shaheb tried to run away several times without success. He wrote letters home but received no response. He wrote to the British army battalion to no avail. He could get no information nor any leave. After three years he received permission to return to Pindi only to find his old battalion had vanished. He couldn't even find out where they had gone. On searching for his commanding officer, Robert, he found out that the latter had resigned and gone back to England with his daughter.

After more searching, he got Helen's home address and wrote many letters. Many days later, he received a response. It said, "The people you are looking for no longer reside at this address. They have sold this house and moved to Scotland. We do not know anything more. Please do not write to us again."

Several years later, after many tears shed by his mother, Yasin Shaheb finally married Ehsan's mother. About thirty years after this, a young English gentleman presented himself at his house. After ascertaining that it was indeed Yasin Shaheb's home, the young man asked for permission to enter. Yasin Shaheb gazed at the young man in amazement. The handsome gentleman looked so familiar. He introduced himself as Robert Yasin and said that his mother's name was Helen. Instantly, Yasin Shaheb understood why the boy's face looked so familiar. He gave a shout and hugged the young man for this was his love's treasure!

From Robert Yasin, he heard that Helen was no more. After returning to England, Helen's father had tried to force her to abort the baby. She refused and left her father. She got a job and brought up her son Robert Yasin. And once he was grown, she told him about her past. When he received a commission in the British Navy, Helen requested him to go to India and look for Yasin Ullah, and to tell him that she had always loved him but was helpless. Robert Yasin had come here just for his mother. Even after being requested many times, Robert Yasin refused to stay and left the same day. As he left, he announced that he would never return.

Pathan men never cry, but that day, Yasin Shaheb could not hold back tears. Even now, as he retold the story, he wept for a long time. Ehsan, his brother, and his mother all respected his anguish. I listened to his story, mesmerized. I felt a sadness within for Yasin and Helen.

The next morning as I went to answer nature's call, I got into trouble. They had no toilet! I had to finish my business on the rooftop. Ehsan advised me to get done before anyone else awoke. But as I had a long-standing habit of bathing in the morning, Ehsan had to carry up a bucket of hot water for me. When I

returned to my room, he had lighted a fire for me in the fireplace. The sun rose after ten in the morning. Ehsan took me then to the farmhouse which Helen used to visit. The ancient place now housed a stable with horses, buffaloes, cows, and outside, some farm land. We returned before dark. Ehsan also showed me around Pindi. It was a small cantonment city. Very neat. Houses lined up, each with large compounds. Many of the hedges were flower gardens. There were flower beds next to the streets too. There was a hotel or two, and a restaurant. Then one night, Ehsan saw me off on the train. I returned to Lahore. It was a little warmer here.

There were almost a hundred cinema halls in Lahore, of which the Plaza and Odian were well-known. I watched an English movie or two. And in the meantime, one Sunday, I also went to visit Charu Bhai whose address I had brought with me from home. Charu Bhai had run away from his home in Poygram Kashba to this place. He worked at the PWD and had been here for a while, having married a Punjabi. The children were also Punjabi but he spoke to me in clear Bangla. I had to have lunch with him – there was no way he would let me go. He also took me to visit other friends of him, introducing me to everyone.

Early one morning, Rashid Khan appeared. He said, “Let’s go out. We’ll have lunch at the Gymkhana Club.”

He had brought his driver that day. We sat in the back. The Gymkhana Club was huge. Previously, it was exclusively for the English, but now it was open to Anglo-Indians, old members, and Pakistanis. It was a place for judges, high-ranking officers, lawyers, barristers, and the elite. There was a swimming pool and tennis court, and this was where I first saw a squash court. There was also a large hall, wooden floors, where people danced. There was a billiards room and, on Sunday nights, there was live music at dinner. Cards, gambling, and drinking went on uninhibited, and I was reminded of the small, but beautiful club at the Crescent Jute Mill.

Lots of people began to turn up gradually at the Sunday lunch. Rashid stopped by a table or two to exchange greetings. Everyone was an uncle or aunt to him. Suddenly, he looked towards a table and said to me, ‘Come, let me introduce you.’ When he walked up to the table, everyone greeted him happily with handshakes, asking after his mother, and so on. He introduced me, saying, “This is my classmate from East Pakistan, Shahid. He’s from Jessore.”

He pointed someone out and said to me, “This uncle is Fayez Ahmed Fayez. A poet. Have you heard of him?”

Rashid also introduced the pretty lady with her hair tied back – the sculptor Novera.

He asked me, “Do you know her?”

I replied in the negative. The lady laughed a little and said in Bangla, “I live in Lahore and work at Al-Hamra. I teach there.”

Suddenly, she asked me, “You came from the Tejgaon Airport, right?”

I said, “Yes.”

She asked, “Did you see a house to the left as you came?”

Again, I said, “Yes, I did.”

She said, “Did you see a work of art there?”

I replied, “Yes, there’s a statue.”

She said, “That was sculpted by me.”

I was surprised – this was the first time I met a female sculptor.

When the food arrived, Rashid said to me as we ate, “If you ever become a member of a club, you should always choose the best one; read good books, not just your textbooks. You must read other books too. There’s the British Council for that, and the USIS. And, of course, there’s always the regular libraries. Books are sold there. Oh, and never drink alcohol at home, never drink it from a water glass or bowl, and never drink alone. If you must drink, do so at a good hotel or a bar or a club. But it’s best to stay away.” We were talking in between bites. He was serious but the atmosphere was one of joy. He continued, “If you play a sport, make sure it is a good one. Play tennis, play squash. You could swim. But football, volleyball, basketball, hockey require body contact. Don’t play these sports.”

I haven’t forgotten Rashid’s words from that day.

Around this time, two professors were sacked from the college. The students demanded to have them reinstated. The VC, Enamul Khan, rejected the petition, and in protest, the students began demonstrations. A leader was born then to lead this protest. His name was Javed, although he was popularly known as Makha. He was enormous, suited to be a leader. But the governor, Kalabaag, summoned the parents when the students began to riot. However, though some parents took their boys home, the protest did not stop. The police had sent Makha too, to his home in Pindi but he was back the next day. Under his leadership, we had a sit-in one day. The event took place on the footpath in front of the Odion Cinema on Mall Road but soon it began to grow. And, as such things go, the decision to march towards the governor’s office was taken. The police charged and disrupted the procession. The next day, the students met on the grounds in front of the Registrar’s office and gave heated speeches. I had gone to watch, but I somehow ended up also giving such a speech. Soon after, the police surrounded us and I was caught. Five of us were rounded up and presented at the governor’s office. Among us were Makha and the Punjabi Afridi, the latter of whom had already made a name for himself as a good speaker. But, although we had all spoken heatedly up till a few minutes ago, we fell silent in front of Governor Kalabaag. We sat submissively. Governor Kalabaag spoke severely. “Students are not responsible for choosing the VC or a professor of the university. They were informed about the rules when they were admitted. Therefore, they can have no more demands.”

He then asked if any of us had anything to say. No one spoke. A couple of men had entered in the meantime. The governor asked that we each be given a month’s detention. As he took down our names and addresses, a police officer informed the governor that there was a civilian scholar in the group. The governor said, “Hand him over to the army.” I was separated from the group and taken to the cantonment where I found Salam Bhai, Maula Bhai, Zaman Bhai and Kamal Laskar. We were all locked up in a large room. But we soon discovered the grill-free window at the back.

We happily climbed out. We’d go to the airport to see the air hostesses. Some of us wanted Coca-Cola. At the airport, we found our Major-in-charge, waiting to flirt with the girls. As soon as we were spotted,

we ran back to the grill-free window and climbed in. We changed and lay down to read. A captain came to make sure all was well. But we never saw that Major Shaheb again.

Anyhow, our month-long imprisonment came to an end eventually and I returned to the Engineering University. By then, the university had calmed down completely.

Exam time drew near, and we became engrossed in study. Once exams were over, I was ready to go home. A friend of Abba's worked at the passport office. He took great care and handed me my passport. I got a visa for India – a multi-entry one – and headed off by train. I was to change trains at Amritsar and go on to Howrah. It would take two days. The Amritsar Immigration found a discrepancy in one number on my passport and visa, and refused to let me go. They would send me back to Lahore the next day. I was taken to the rail station's police station. There, a smallish gentleman asked me in clear Bangla, "Are you from Bangladesh?"

I replied in the affirmative. He introduced himself as Ramesh from West Bengal. He worked in the police department. Once he came off-duty, he showed me around Amritsar and treated me to dinner. He also wanted to take me to a movie. Around 2 am, we returned to the police station. He said, "Look inside your trunk and see if there's anything to put under your head, then go to sleep. I'm off-duty in the morning but I'll see you off on the train."

I couldn't sleep all night. Ramesh Babu saw me off on the train at 10 am. I went to Mannan Bhai's house the moment I got to Lahore. He was surprised to see me. Once I told him everything, he advised me to fly. I would receive a student concession, but he added some money and bought me a ticket himself. I got a seat on the next day's flight. I got off at Dhaka, though I was headed for Jessore. In those days, when PIA passengers coming in from Pakistan were only transiting in Dhaka, they would be accommodated at the Shahbag Hotel. So was I - board and breakfast were free. The next morning, I caught my flight and reached Jessore. Abba-Amma and Mejho Bhai were the happiest to see me. Hasnu, Hasan, Moin and Rekha were also happy to see me. I had brought them lots of gifts. For Amma there were some household articles and a shawl. Then I was off to meet my friends – Hajera Bhai, Kadam Bhai, Abu Bhai, Paru Bhai. Paru Bhai was Hamida Rahman's younger brother, who were both martyred in 1971. He loved me very much. I went to see them, then I went to see Mejho Chacha and Shejho Chacha. I spent a nice vacation with Abba-Amma. The weather was quite warm, although there was also some rain.

While I was in Jessore, I received a letter from Mosharraf Shaheb saying that the results were out but there was a problem with my workshop result. He did not quite say what exactly that meant. Instead, he asked me to return to Lahore post-haste. Everyone eyed the other – no one said anything. Within a day or two, I returned to Lahore. I went to see Mosharraf Shaheb but he didn't know much. From the next day, I made the rounds at the Registrar's office. The results had been published and I saw there were three or four others in my position. It soon became obvious that those who were involved in the Governor Kalabaag issue had failed the workshop. I contacted all of them. No one knew anything. One or two of the university teachers commented that they hadn't seen students fail the workshop before. I asked, "How did it happen? There was no exam. We were given the work – we did it. We received our marks immediately. I never received less than 6 out of 10 in any of them." Miller Shaheb, the workshop-in-charge, had gone home and there was a rumor that he might not renew his contract. A teacher or two gave us a good idea. "You

see, we know what may have happened but we can't really talk about it. It looks like you've been kicked out of the university. Why don't you file a case with the High Court?"

One of Afridi's relatives was a barrister. I went to him. Once I explained, he said this was no big issue. He asked for some paperwork, much of which we did not have. Still, we gave him what we could. He prepared the case slowly. He asked for a hundred taka which I didn't have. So I got a loan from Kamal Shaheb who told me to get the money from home and return it as soon as possible. He also said, "Neither a lender nor a borrower be." Within three or four days, he began to ask if my money order had arrived. He was becoming impatient because the money order was late. Then one day, at his call, I went out to see the peon had brought my money order. I gave one taka to the peon as a tip and gave the rest ninety-nine to Kamal Lasker Shaheb but he refused to let the one taka go. He warned me repeatedly to return the one taka once I received my scholarship. On scholarship day, he arrived on my doorstep in the morning and hurried me to the cantonment – he paid the bus fare though. I received one hundred and twenty taka. I said, "I don't have one taka." He took a ten taka note from my hand and returned nine taka right away. He said, "I knew something like this may happen, so I came prepared." Silently, I said, "Just you wait!" When we got out, I said, "I'm going to Biden Road. I'm going to eat some polao and chicken roast before going back to the hostel." He said, "You waste money for nothing! There will be food waiting for you at the hostel." I said, "No, today I want to eat something special. Will you go too?" He said, "Okay." From RA Road, we got on a bus and rode directly to Mall Road junction. There was a famous eatery named Cleary Homes. I ordered my food and said, "Now you order yours." He said, "The same." The waiter took our orders and left. Our food soon arrived, both mine and his – the polao on one dish and the chicken roast in a separate bowl. There was also a bit of salad. I ate quickly and got up, saying, "I just need to visit the restroom." I went up the cashier and said, "Make two bills – one for me, one for him." I paid for my food and said, "Give him his bill once he's done eating." Then I said to Kamal Shaheb, "I'm waiting outside. Please come when you're finished."

I don't know what happened inside but when he came out, he was ready to hit me. He said, "You invite me and then insult me?" I said, "When did I invite you?" "What?! Didn't you ask me to come with you?" I replied, "I only said I was coming to eat here and would you come too. That doesn't mean I invited you." He grumbled, "I just spent three and a half taka." He got on the bus silently. After a while, he began to laugh. Then he slapped my hand and said, "You really showed me!" I said, "No. It's each man for himself. You shouldn't treat anyone nor accept a treat from anyone. It's like you said – neither a lender nor a borrower be." We laughed all the way back. I never forgot this incident – perhaps because he was right.

The case came up in court and a date was set. A lot of time had passed and classes had already begun. Everyone was in class except the four of us. My stipend had been reduced by half and I couldn't even get a room in the hostel because I was no longer a student. Mowla Bhai offered me some space in his room and even though not everyone was happy about it, I stayed. I ate at Mukta's shop outside. On the day of the hearing, I appeared in court, alone, because I couldn't find the others. I couldn't see anyone at the court either, not even the lawyer. However, the college registrar and a couple of others had arrived. When our case was called, the judge took his seat on the bench. I believe there were two of them. The senior judge asked, "Where is the plaintiff? Defendant?" But there was no one with me – not even the lawyer. I couldn't tell if they had made excuses and run away. Even Afridi, for all his brashness, was absent. Anyhow, I stood up and said, "My lord."

He replied, “No need. Who’re you? Were you thrown out?”

I said, “Yes, sir.”

He said, “Ok, let me see. Where’s your lawyer?”

I replied, “I don’t see him. I think he ran away.”

“Where are the rest? There were supposed to be three others.”

“I don’t see them either, sir,” I responded.

The judge then told me to sit. He read through the case again, then said, “Mr. Registrar, please stand up.”

When the registrar stood up, the judge asked, “How old is your college?”

The registrar replied, “19 years.”

The judge then asked, “So how many others did this happen with in these many years?”

The registrar replied, “This is the first time.”

“How did they fail?”

The registrar said, “Because they didn’t pass.”

The judge said, “Yes, I understand that, you know. But was there an exam?”

The registrar said, “No, sir.”

His lawyer then tried to explain too, but the judge said, “I don’t see the point of a lawyer like that. I know what’s going on.”

I was told to stand again and asked, “Are you into politics?”

I said, “No, sir.”

“Which party?”

“I don’t have a party, sir.”

“It’s written here that you protested against Kalabagh.”

I said, “Sir, I was trapped.”

The judge said, “Don’t get trapped again. Sit down.”

The registrar was still standing. The judge asked him, “So he didn’t even sit for the exam, and yet you threw him out?”

The registrar responded, “Sir, the students are asked to work. You know, a job. They are graded on that.”

The judge said, “In that case, the marks are given on a daily basis and it is easy to see if someone will fail.”

The registrar was quiet. The judge spoke to him sharply, “Listen, stop this nonsense. Tomorrow you will readmit the students into the second year and you will let me know. If not…I will put you inside!”

The judge’s language was really inappropriate. At times in Punjabi, then in Urdu and at times in English, he told the registrar off. Once he was done, he closed the case.

I returned to the university. I couldn’t get a place in D hostel, so I had to go to E. So I did. I got the room next to Ehsan and concentrated on my studies. I also played table tennis. Ehsan was a good player but I started to grow distant from him. I made a couple of new friends. One of them was Golam Ahmed, an powerful debater. He was a good student as well. So I would talk to him about everything. In the meantime, someone in D hostel changed his status to a day scholar. His room became available and I rushed to claim it. Coincidentally, I got my old room no. 58. Saber Parvez and Mohammad Ali were in their old room, but by this time, it had become known that they were lovers. This was common in Punjab. Later on, I learned that there were many other pairs like this. Sixty percent of Punjab is gay. I write this on estimation. The number may be higher.

I made a new friend in my new class. His name was Suleiman. From Sialkot – a veritable peasant. Well-off though. He was good-humored. The person in the room next to his in the E Hostel, Aga, turned out to be a city-bred. They were polar opposites. Aga was quite modern and Suleiman was equally backward. But they were very close friends. The friendship, however, was not the give-and-take sort. It was the give sort only where Suleiman would give and give, and Aga would take. Aga never walked to the main block. He needed a car – and he was ready to sacrifice anything for a ride. I’ve seen him even miss classes because of this.

On one such day, as we got out of class, we saw Aga, having missed his class, alighting from the municipality’s garbage truck at GT Road. When he saw us coming, he realized our class would be in the Annex building, close to our hostel. So, with no other option, he had to walk back with us. Suleiman was quite amused. He laughed all the way back.

One night, Suleiman appeared in my room, crying. After a bit of coaxing, he revealed that Aga’s mother was very ill. I asked, “If Aga’s mother is sick, why are *you* crying?”

He replied, “Aga has taken the Horlicks, biscuits, glucose – they were all brand new. He took them all for his mother.”

The truth, if it be told, was that Aga had stolen everything and left.

One day, I heard a taxi driver call to me loudly. When I opened my window to inquire, he said, “A friend of yours is here. Bring a sheet and come down quickly.”

I said, “Why are you calling me? His room is in the next hostel. Take him there.”

The taxi driver responded, “I can’t go that far. Just get a sheet and come quickly.”

I grabbed a sheet and ran down to the taxi. Peeking in, I saw Aga, completely naked. He sat with his head bowed. I asked, “Aga, how did this happen?” He kept mum. The taxi driver requested, “Brother, please give him the sheet first.”

Aga wrapped the sheet around him and stepped out. To the taxi driver, I said, “Wait, let me get you the fare.” He said, “No need. How can students do such a thing? They took everything off him, then put him into my taxi.”

“Who did? Why did they?”

Without answering, the taxi driver quickly turned his taxi around and left. Aga signaled to me to take him upstairs. I did as he asked but he wouldn’t come into my room. Instead, I had to take him through our verandah, up the back stairs of his hostel and into his room. Aga went and sat on his bed. I guessed some of what had happened. I went to Suleiman’s room and gave him a brief description. Suleiman was reading a book then. Hearing about Aga, he began to laugh. The chair he sat in couldn’t withstand that laughter, so he lay on the cot and laughed fit to burst, his legs up in the air. Then he said, “Come, let’s go and see him. After all, he’s my friend.”

A few days after this incident, Suleiman appeared in my room again. He was crying as before. After a long time, I learned that he had a disease. I asked, “What disease?” But he wouldn’t say. So I suggested, “Whatever it is, see a doctor.”

He said, “I can’t see a doctor.”

“Why not? We have free access to the university doctor. What’s the problem?”

He replied, “I’ve seen him twice already. I can’t go to him again.”

“Why not?” I asked again.

After much persuasion, he revealed that he had gonorrhea. And the doctor he had seen had threatened that if it happened again, he would cut Suleiman’s penis off. So he had found another doctor behind the Garishah but was afraid to go by himself. I fell from the sky. Finally, I was forced to take him to the doctor. The doctor was from Punjab. He drew the curtain, laid Suleiman down, stripped the cloth from his behind and injected him with a huge needle. Suleiman screamed and the doctor cursed. There is nothing like hearing a Punjabi curse. It is disgustingly beautiful. The doctor turned gonorrhea into a joke. When Suleiman drew out his wallet to pay him, the doctor said, “No need. You’re a student. Just get out of here.”

As soon as Suleiman turned around to leave, the doctor kicked him hard, right where he had pushed the needle. Then he said, “Bastard! Spending all his father’s money on those bitches!”

Suleiman cried like a baby as he went out. Then he said to me, “Come, friend, let’s go have biryani at Garishah Restaurant.”

Suleiman never went down this path again. And he has remained my friend to this day. Aga also changed completely and began to attend classes regularly.

Time passed. The number of Bangali students in Lahore increased. More and more students came from East Pakistan. It was the same in Punjab University. There were numerous scholarships – with a good amount provided for the inter-wing. Some students came from Chittagong. There was someone called Jamal Shaheb with us. He could never be happy anywhere, except one place. It was a place we never went. Two or three of the students from Chittagong and one from Mymensingh followed him. They went to Shukhi Para. Even there, they began to get student concessions. Apparently, if the residents of Shukhi

Para saw any student coming during the day, they would begin to shout, “Student coming! Get ready!” and so on.

Many of the students would go to Mogulpura too. This was the Anglo-Indian neighborhood. There was a huge workshop there. They even found a place for themselves there.

Among those who arrived was Majedul Islam, Johurul Islam’s younger brother, an ideal young man. He became my fan. He was a very good student and prayed five times a day. But he harbored some animosity towards the Pakistanis because their behavior was not good. By this time, I had realized that anything Bangla-Bangali-Sheikh Mujib was bad to them. Bangalis were bad, Sheikh Mujib was bad, Rabindranath was bad. Many would ask if there was a Bangla language, if we could write in Bangla, did we have any poems in Bangla, and so on. They would also ask if we lived in water, or in the trees, whether snakes entered our homes, did we have magicians in every home – magic of Bangal. The English touts put us together with these people and made Pakistan. We could have been independent Bangladesh and they could have been independent Pakistan in ’47. The English should have done that.

The result of mixing with everyone was that I became quite an expert in Urdu and Punjabi. My fluency, combined with my facial features, made me acceptable to them. They would even say, “*Yaar* Shahed, you’re no Bangali.” My only response to this was a slap on the face, with a question, “Am I a bastard then?”

Rashid Khan taught me something: the only medicine for a Punjabi is a beating. A thrashing. If any of them ever insults you, just respond with a sharp slap. And a kick in the groin. They’ll fall instantly – and become your instant fan. I had already seen some examples of this. There was a tennis table on the first floor of our hostel where a tournament was taking place. On the day of the final, Makha came down and stopped the game. The noise was bothering his studies, he said. The response was if the noise bothered him during the day, he could study at night. He replied that he couldn’t read at night. He had to do it now. No matter what anyone said, Makha’s response was “No.” Someone came to get me to talk to Makha. I explained, “Today is the day of the final. It’s Sunday and it’s almost dark. Let them finish the game.”

He said, “No, Shahid.”

I had no other option but to deliver some “medicine” – a hard slap and a kick. He grabbed both hands and keeled over right there. When he’d recovered a little, he cried and said to me, “How could you hit me?”

I said, “Go upstairs right now.”

He muttered under his breath as he left. Makha’s defiance was cut in half that day because the word soon spread that he had had a thrashing.

Makha also had a bad habit of watching Punjabi movies and coming back late at night, singing songs in his tuneless voice. He also loved swinging swords around. There was no reaction even after several requests to stop. And during the summer, we would sleep outside, but there was no sleep after midnight because of Makha’s torture. Everyone came to me for help. So one day, I bought a knife and went to bed with the others. I waited up for him and, on schedule, Makha appeared, singing his tuneless songs and swing his sword above his head. As soon as he came close, I stuck out my huge knife and said, “Come, I’ll also play swords with you today.”

As soon as he heard me, Makha ran. It was like an obstacle race as he jumped over cots, one after another, from the second floor to the first and into the rose garden, onto a mound of earth where he fell. He picked himself up and ran off again, across the field and into the E hostel.

Two or three friends congratulated me that very night. Makha never came back to that hostel again. He found a space in E hostel and never bothered anyone again. That, of course, doesn't mean that now I had become a rogue, but that is what everyone thought.

The number of Bangalis increased, and so did the groups. Trouble began. And yet, there was friendship. We would do many things together like watch movies or enjoy the disreputable dancers at the Metro on the weekends. The audience was quite large – some even fathers and sons. A dancer named Nilu was especially huge and equally obscene in her moves. The Punjabi father-son pairs would shout in great pleasure and go mad if they caught a glimpse of any part of Nilu's exposed body parts. Punjabis respect their mothers deeply but they don't care about girls or sisterly types. They have to be in the "mother" category – and old – to receive respect. Even brothers and sisters have to be locked up in different rooms. If the fathers returned drunk at night, mothers would lock up their daughters in fear. Ninety percent of Punjabi marriages take place among relatives even if the groom is a well-known no-good. That doesn't really bother Punjabis.

I saw this in the army too – probably about eighty percent. But not among the Bangalis – at least not among ninety percent of them. The Punjabis loved to chat but would become silent in front of Mashriqi Pakistanis. And yet, their disgust for Bangalis was quite obvious.

Once in Lahore, during Eid, I got into trouble over food. During Eid, the hostel was shut down and food was not available in the shops around, except sweetmeats or "mithai," as they were locally called. I heard that Afridi had made some arrangements. Including Khaled and Samad, there were four of us. He had told us that we'd head out after the prayer. It was quite far, but we set out on foot so that we could work up an appetite. The roads were quiet because of Eid. After a long walk, Afridi brought us to Professor Dr. Khilji Mahmud's home which was close to town. On the way, Afridi had said, "When you see the Basmati rice and eat the Basmati rice, then you can congratulate me."

When we rang the bell, Dr. Khilji Mahmud opened the door, a little surprised, but then he embraced us. He invited us in and said, "You may know that my wife lives in Australia. I live here with a niece." He called his niece who turned out to be quite beautiful and tall. She greeted us and we greeted her back. Dr. Khilji said, "These are all my students from the Engineering College. Give them some good food – parata and meat, and some sweetmeats too. And tea."

When the girl left, he said, "She is my brother, Fazal Mahmud's daughter. Her father goes around playing cricket so she has to stay with me."

The food arrived soon after. It was served in the living room. We ate well and he looked after us. I think he knew we had come there just for the lunch. After we were done, he called his niece again and asked her to sit. He said, "Child, tell them what you do, what you study, what you play. They'll be happy to hear it."

The girl spoke shyly, telling us a few things. Then, at her uncle's signal, she left. Dr. Khilji then said, "Did you have your fill of her? You're in the third year of Engineering. First graduate, get a good job, then, if

this daughter of mine is still unmarried, come with a proposal. If I think that you're a good candidate, I will give you her hand. But remember one thing – if I ever see you anywhere around here before then, I will put a hole in your stomach. Now go!"

Stunned, we piled out on to the footpath and walked away, heads bowed. A few moments later, Samad grabbed Afridi and gave him a couple of punches, so that Afridi fell to the ground. We just managed to stop him. There was a buggy but all four of us wouldn't fit in it. Besides, we had had a heavy lunch and Dr. Khilji's scathing words on top, so we needed to walk it off. And as we did, we cooled down – and anyway, there was nothing else we could do.

When we got back to the hostel, I asked the mess boy, Wali, "Why don't you cook anything on Eid day? Then we could at least eat something." He replied that he had already received such inquiries from others and he would cook beef that night. There would also be dal and bread. And truly, Wali delivered that night.

Because the number of Bangalis in Lahore began to grow, the East Pakistan Students' Association was formed. Bulu Bhai, that is, Brigadier Salam, was the leader. The main job of the association was to look after all the students who came in from East Pakistan. So, often, we would hold seminars and symposiums to get to know one another. If any renowned figure or celebrity, like a politician, poet, litterateur, businessman, or artiste visited, we would meet them and provide all necessary support. One other important task we had was to maintain links with the West Pakistani leaders like Mumtaz, Daulatana, Wali Khan, and others. I, however, could not contribute much to the East Pakistan Students' Association, but I did attend all their programs. I also visited almost every well-known Pakistani's home. I was present in almost every Bangali cultural show. I felt hurt at times though when I saw some Bangali political leaders sucking up to the Pakistanis. The Pakistanis understood this quite well too, so they would pat the heads of these political yes-men. But the case was quite the opposite with Sheikh Mujib. The Pakistanis were never happy to see him, except perhaps Daulatana and Iftekharuddin. Iftekhar Shaheb was the proprietor of the *Pakistan Times*. Khan Wali Khan and his party were happy. They said, "Sheikh Mujib never minces his words, so the Punjabis don't like him. Anyone who speaks the truth is a traitor to them."

During my third year, I became the mess secretary of D hostel. At a meeting, I had to listen to a lot of complaints and demands from the attendees – that good food was never served; there were thieves. So my first job as secretary was to ask for the daily accounts. As I investigated, I realized that there had indeed been stealing and it was possible to improve the food quality if we tried. The bill came to 50 or 53 taka per month. If we increased that by 4 or 5 taka, we could afford a chicken one day or even polao. Gradually, I brought everything under control.

A civilian scholar named Mohammad Ikramullah arrived from Chittagong Cadet College. With big bushy hair, he was a well-built man. His voice could be heard from one hostel to another. He was given a room downstairs in one corner and he was joined by Elias from Jessore. Elias was paying his own tuition. He was a good student, but an even better sportsman. As such, he was given the best room and soon he began his sports activities. I would accompany him but I didn't do too well. He disliked my weight-lifting. According to him, weight-lifting was for fools. I said, "Do you know that I came third in one category at Layalpur Inter-university?" He replied, "I still don't like it." Then I revealed that in the competition where I came third, there were only three participants. He laughed out loud at that. Then he showed me how to

do proper weight training. There were certain exercises to be done with less weights. This was quite useful for building small muscles. It was necessary, however, to run or walk a little before doing the exercises. He also taught me how to run although he wasn't very comfortable with me as our speeds were different.

I still have one regret – I never saw Karachi. Lahore considered Karachi beneath them, so they never organized any programs there. And so I never got to go.

Soon sports day arrived. There were sixteen track and field events at our university, and Elias participated in fifteen of them. He won all fifteen. Governor Kalabaag had come for the event. A famous Pakistani actor named Shantosh Kumar had also come. He insisted on sitting two or three rows behind the governor. Kalabaag saw him and called for him to be seated by him. Shantosh Kumar was a powerful actor, an incredible human being, quite handsome, gentle and well-mannered. He had acted in some Bollywood movies before Pakistan's independence. Kalabaag was surprised as he went up to distribute the prizes. The same person had received all the first prizes – and that too a student of East Pakistan. What was he to do!

We Bangalis were ecstatic. We celebrated late into the night. The Pakistanis were not happy about this, of course, but a couple of them stopped by to congratulate Elias. One of these was fourth-year student Mohammad Ali, who would occasionally win first place in one or two events but this time, he came second in several events. For several days, we reveled in Elias's achievements.

Tareq Ali appeared one day at D Hostel. With him, he brought a harmonium, tablas and a large picture of a hunched Rabindranath Tagore wearing a long gown. He hung up the picture on his wall and went through vocal practice every morning. This led to protests among the West Pakistanis. According to them, this was unIslamic and could not be allowed in a country like Pakistan. Letting it continue was equal to committing a major sin, and so it must be stopped. The matter was becoming serious. So one morning, we went to Tareq Ali's room and informed him of the complaint, but he refused to stop. Finally, we found a solution: Tareq Ali could practice singing but he would have to keep his door and windows shut. Tareq Ali was upset, but realizing the seriousness of the situation, he finally agreed. In the meantime, Tareq Ali found a Punjabi servant, Abu who spoke nothing but Punjabi. Tareq Ali, being a Bangali, did not even speak Urdu, let alone Punjabi. Yet, the two conversed, quarreled, laughed and joked. It was quite entertaining for us.

At one point, Tareq Ali entered the cultural scene of Pakistani. Lahore was culturally-oriented, and, in spite of being Bangali, Tareq Ali made a place for himself there. English helped.

A student arrived from the Engineering University in East Pakistan. He was, however, a Punjabi, not a Bangali. His father was the DG of EPR, which is why he had been in East Pakistan. He had been studying there too. His father had been posted to Peshawar recently and so, with a transfer certificate, he had come to the Lahore Engineering University. His name was Akhtar Daad. Of course, he needed a room but there were none available. He was determined to stay at D Hostel, so finally, he was assigned to share with Ikramullah, and they became fast friends quickly. Initially, Akhtar and I were not close because he would not abide by any rules. But he had to, of course, just like everyone else. Adjustment is key. Anyway, he and I became good friends later.

We had a study tour, where we traveled by train from Lahore to Peshawar. A fee was charged for this. We would be on the train the entire time. Once we headed off, I learned that I would have to pay for my meals. I hadn't brought any money, not that I had any. So, finally, I spent the days eating pakora. Akhtar Daad saw this. Two days later, he asked, "Do you love pakoras?"

I said, "What nonsense! I don't have any money – so what else do I do?"

He asked, "How much money did you bring?"

"Ten taka," I said.

Akhtar burst out laughing. "If you don't mind, let me treat you to lunch today."

I said, "Why would I mind? I would say thank you!"

He took me to the railway station at lunchtime and we entered the first class dining room. This is the first time I saw a quality cafeteria after the gymkhana. Delicious food was served up in a congenial environment. I felt as though I hadn't eaten in two days. Akhtar Daad was happy and I thanked him profusely.

The next day, we arrived at Peshawar. Akhtar Daad declared that we would have to eat at his home. His father was Brigadier Saab Daad, the log area commander of Peshawar. We had the day off and we had permission to go sightseeing, watch a movie or visit relatives if there were any.

In the afternoon, Akhtar Daad took me to his home. All the houses looked alike but Akhtar Daad's house was different, better, because his father, Brigadier Saab Daad was the log area commander. They lived in style. Akhtar Daad introduced me to his parents and three brothers, Faruk, Zahed, and Shahed. Shahed was quite young then, maybe 7 or 8. He became an Airforce Group Captain of Pakistan later on, but disputes led to his leaving the Airforce for America where he did his PhD from Harvard. Anyhow, we sat in the living room, a large, stylish room. There was a radiogram in the room, which was turned on. Then I said to Brigadier Saab Daad, "I saw you at Jessore MM College. You had gone there to inspire us to join the Army or Defense Force."

He nodded. Yes, he had gone to a college in Jessore. Ruhul Quddus was the DM or DC of Jessore at the time and Joardar Shaheb was the principal of MM College. I said, "You were a member of my ISSB interview board and the chairman was General Shirin Dil Khan Niazi. She was a Brigadier then."

He remembered Shirin Khan and was happy. Lunch arrived – and like Punjabi food, as I mentioned before, very neatly prepared. Clean, but little in amount. But the taste was delicious. It was mostly meat and potatoes. There may be other vegetables instead of potatoes. After lunch, some fruit was brought out with cut-up sugarcane pieces. Everyone chewed on them as did I. For me, eating sugarcane meant stealing some stalks from someone's field in Jessore with friends and using our teeth to peel off the tough skin. And that sugarcane had been promoted to the dining table here. What good fortune! After lunch, as we sat in the living room, tea appeared. It was green tea. I had no idea that such a tea existed. This was the first time I heard of it. I took a sip or two after it had cooled down a bit and thought, "Why do these people drink this?" To me, it tasted just like hot water!

Later in the afternoon, Akhtar Daad showed me around Peshawar. We had taken his father's car for this purpose. The city was delightful, just like a cantonment city from the British era. They had good restaurants, cinema halls, and rows of beautiful houses – all from the British period. There was a road for goods transfer, gardens lining the sides with roses in them. There was a marketplace famously known as Kicchakhani Bazar, an older part of town. It had no connection with the army. A settlement for the civilians had grown next to the cantonment – this place was the result. Apparently there was a well-known "Shukhi Palli"[38] here too. Most people wore shalwar-kamiz, sandals, turbans, and carried a gun on their shoulder. The gun was a part of the Pathan look, just as the British wear ties. They begin to carry guns from a very young age – they had to have it, never going out without it. Guns and rifles were made in every other house. They did not believe in the government judicial system, instead, meting out justice as they saw fit, including killing.

Akhtar Daad treated me to tea and sweets. In the evening, we climbed aboard the train again, and returned to Lahore one and a half days later. From then on, I became close to Akhtar Daad and remain so till today.

Third year civil engineering students were required to go on a survey. We went to Swat. We were put up in a school where we were to stay for a month. There was a river in Swat as well as a palace where Badshahs lived. It was a mountainous region and the people were Pathans. The capital of Swat was Mingora, where we stayed. On the second day, we encountered a problem when we went to shower. We had never bathed in such cold water before. We were taken to a certain area for our survey work – a vast area between the river and the road. There were no trees anywhere – just rocks and hills. On the other side, however, it was just the opposite. There were paddy fields there and the mountain rose right after that. Snow fell on the mountains in the winter. We could still see the white snow on the peaks about eighty or ninety miles away. Our survey work went on every morning from eight to four. We would be given time for lunch there. One day at lunchtime, I sat next to the road under a tree and opened my lunchbox. There were two or three others with me. A few Pathan houses dotted the area opposite. A little girl appeared from one of the houses and came to stare at us. She was probably seven or eight. I had never seen such a beautiful child before. Seeing her staring, I picked up a piece of bread and called to her, "Little girl, do you want some bread?" Suddenly the girl's father appeared behind her and picked her up, saying, "You eat. You're students. You'll become engineers and you will succeed. You will come in handy for us." He then left with his daughter.

We had a day off. Those who had visited Mingora before said, "Let's go and see the Badshah." I was curious, never having seen a Badshah before. We left just a little before sunset. First we went to the palace. It was quite large and beautiful. We started to climb the hill when at a certain point, a guard stopped us and said, "You can't go any further." We stopped. There were stone benches, chairs, tables placed there – all made of marble. A little later, some people brought in bedding and cushions to cover up the benches. The Badshah was carried in and laid down on top of those cushions. Ayub Khan's son, Gohar Khan had married one of the daughters of this Badshah. He was a captain at the time. Later he became the Speaker of the Pakistan Parliament. As soon as the Badshah was laid down, armed guards surrounded him. Then, one or two faithful servants came to stand by his head. When the Badshah signaled to them, they came forward to make him more comfortable. Later I learned that the Badshah was blind. He was quite old. When the sun was about to set, the Badshah was carried out again. His subjects began to leave one by one

[38] A red-light area

as well. So did we. All I could think about was that this Badshah had once ruled a kingdom, ridden on horses, had soldiers, had pomp. And today, he had to be carried in the arms of a servant – a completely dependent old man!

I began to dedicate my efforts into helping my younger siblings succeed. We were financially better off now, in fact, much better off. Abba was receiving a pension while Boro Bhai and Mejho Bhai's jobs brought some relief. Mintu, my younger brother, worked in a jute mill in Daulatpur. He handed over every penny he earned to our father. We now had a tap in our house so we didn't need to haul water from elsewhere. A bathroom had been constructed and we could now bathe at home. Boro Bhai had become the Labor Officer by now.

When I came home to visit, I always brought something or the other for Ma and my siblings. This time, I brought a tea trolley for Ma to serve snacks and tea on. One of my Mamani's[39] brothers, Obaid Mama, once sat on the trolley in the living room when he came to visit from Monirampur. The glass and aluminum trolley had wheels. We eyed each other but couldn't say anything. Our young maidservant, Chchutu, came every few minutes to see if the trolley had become available because she had been strictly instructed not to serve tea and snacks unless they were on the trolley. Then someone had the bright idea of telling Obaid Mama that Ma wanted to see him inside. The trolley was vacated and Chchutu quickly rolled it out, heaving a sigh of relief.

Mejho Bhai's father-in-law, Rahman Shaheb, came to see his daughter for the first time from Comilla. He arrived at our home exactly at lunchtime. Mejho Bhai said, "Abba, please join us. Eat something." Rahman Shaheb replied that he had eaten four anna worth of rice, six anna of fish, and four anna of dal, a total of fourteen anna worth of food, at the ghat. Mejho Bhai ground his teeth in embarrassment and said, "Why not eat about eight anna worth here too?" Rahman Shaheb did not eat. He was actually a rather simple and straightforward man. In the afternoon, he was going to take Mejho Bhai to see a piece of land near the airport, which he would buy for his son-in-law. I was tasked with summoning a rickshaw. Stepping on the lower platform of the rickshaw, he clambered on with much difficulty, only to tumble over backwards as he stood up to turn around and seat himself down, breaking his hip in the process. We cannot always prevent things happening in front of us when they occur in the blink of an eye, but I did instantly pick him up in my arms, brought him in, and lay him down in bed. Lying on the bed, that simple man did not make a sound, except to say, "I hurt my foot."

I must also tell the tale of another simple soul. The man was my younger brother, Hasan's father-in-law. At his daughter's wedding, he sat down to eat with me without realizing it, even though he was from the bride's side of the family.

I asked, "Shonamiya, what is the groom's name?" I couldn't think of a simpler question than this. He laughed and said, "My son arranged the marriage. He knows." In the meantime, to the waiter passing by

[39] Wife of a maternal uncle

with the chicken roast platter, he said, “Listen brother. Would you please exchange my kabab for a piece of chicken?”

This was Shonamiya. Would anyone need to go elsewhere to understand the meaning of simplicity?

These people have taught me a lot in life. I am grateful to them.

Whenever I came to Jessore, Abba, Amma and my younger siblings would be very happy. I would visit Boro Bhai in Khulna too. I quite liked the life at the Crescent Jute Mill. It was rather glamorous. The mill had its own tennis court, swimming pool, club, and billiards room. Card games were played and the club had a bar. Gambling and drinking was rampant. Outsiders visited sometimes too. During the evening, especially on Saturdays nights, tambula was played.

Boro Bhai visited the club as a leader. I was proud of him – cigarette in hand, he would hold his cue at the billiards table after putting his glass down. It filled my heart. I thought when I grow up, one day I will be like Boro Bhai at the gymkhana.

I must also tell about our neighbor Montu Nana. His oldest son, Togor was beyond his control. The boy failed his matric exams. Around dawn, Nana suddenly got hold of him and tied him up to the jamrul tree. Togor was in his underwear only. Nana flayed him with a konchi[40] as he said, “I’m teaching my son a lesson.” When Togor fainted from the beating, he was untied and laid on the ground, but in an instant, the hitherto unconscious Togor Mamu leaped up and flew off like a kite. He crossed the Bhoirob River in a shot into the Hindu neighborhood on the other side. At the end of the year, a letter arrived to announce that he had joined the navy in Karachi. He would occasionally visit the home of the Naval Commander. In 1960, when the Queen of England visited, he had danced with her at a party on Ayub Khan’s orders. These and other such stories were communicated to his younger brother, Inu, through letters. We would listen and shiver with excitement at his bravery.

In the summer of 1961, Togor Mamu came home. I was home at the time too. We sat on the paved yard of the local shop and I listened to his stories. In the meantime, I saw, not too far away, the skinny Bholanath in a gamccha,[41] trying to cut down a tall, bent, barren coconut tree. Though his strokes had no force, the tree suddenly toppled over Bhola’s head, taking him down as it fell on the road. We ran to the scene to see that Bhola’s brains were splattered all over. Somehow, we moved the tree and gathering Bholanath’s brains into a handkerchief, I stuffed the bundle into his skull and tied it up with a gamccha. Then, with everyone’s help, we took him to Nizam’s house.

When I returned to the shop, I found Togor Mamu lying unconscious by the side of the road. Someone was trying to wake him up with the smell from the sole of a dirty shoe. I got some water from Abul Chacha’s tubewell and sprinkled it on his face. He sat up and began to blabber about why he had fainted. He wanted to clarify that it had nothing to do with the brains. I left then and headed for home.

[40] A bamboo cane
[41] A checkered light towel

There were two or three PIA flights on the Dhaka-Jessore-Dhaka route. I took one and went to Lahore. Exams were coming up and the pressure to study had increased. I was still at university. Though I attended classes, my heart was not in it. The surveys I had worked so hard on completing at Swat were copied by others. They copied the drawings and submitted them. Each of them received 8 or 9 marks while I received just 6 out of 10! Jamaluddin was the Head of Civil Engineering. He had come from abroad, was a good teacher, and worked diligently. His son was also studying engineering. He came to work from Gulbagh in the office car and his son came on his bike. One day, as I stood waiting in the Annex Block garden for class to begin, Jamaluddin Shaheb saw me and called me to his office. After I sat down, he said, "Look Shahed, you seem to have done something that others are not happy with. Especially our Vice-Chancellor. There are some who like to fuel the fire too. They don't want you to pass. I shouldn't be telling you this, but I think it's wrong. I objected to them and I'm informing you too. You've come here from East Pakistan to study. What's happened is past and I want you to focus on studying, but be careful." He stood up then and told me to go. Now I understood why I had received such low marks. I became reserved. I hung a "Don't Disturb" sign on my door and shut it, staying in to study hard. One or two people even helped me.

Johur, the oldest son of Shanti Bhai from our neighborhood, worked at PIA at the time. He came to visit Lahore one day and stayed with me in my room for a couple of days. He was a nice person and even amidst so much pressure, I too him one Sunday to visit the Shalimar Gardens. There were many shops around the gate and yet, none of the shopkeepers knew the Shalimar Gardens! Johur would not believe me when I told him this, so I took him to a shop and asked the shopkeeper, "Bhai, there is a Moghul garden called Shalimar Gardens. Do you know where it is?" The shopkeeper replied in Punjabi, "Maybe it's somewhere in Delhi."

We were laughing as we entered the Gardens. I said to Johur, "The Shah of Iran, Pahlavi, brought his wife, Farah Diba, here, and Ayub Khan came with them. Civilian scholars are invited to such events, so I saw them all from up close. India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was here too, but Indira Gandhi didn't come. He had walked down with Ayub Khan as we stood in line but I missed the handshake because I had raised my hand in greeting. Nehru had looked very grim and I don't think he was happy about being there. He must have felt compelled to come for some reason. Just think – a military ruler and the son of democracy, walking side by side!"

I took Johur to Shahi Masjid and the court. He was quite impressed. Suddenly, as we stood in front of Shahi Masjid, Johur whispered, "Isn't Heera Mandi close by?" I said, "How do you know?!" He said, "I work at PIA. We too need to keep track of these things." So I answered in the affirmative and he asked, "Can we go there this evening?" I said, "Look, Johur, I'm not getting mixed up in this. If you want to go, feel free but if you come back naked in a taxi, I won't let you into my room. I've had enough of such experiences."

I moved for D Hostel to F Hostel in my fourth year. I shut my door and focused on my studies. I made a couple of new friends of whom one was Karam Elahi. He always came first with excellent marks in Electrical Engineering. One day, I was summoned to his room. His father, who had come to visit, wanted to meet an East Pakistani student. I came to know that his father worked in academia. He was an office assistant or peon at a school in Peshawar.

I don’t know why but it seemed as if I was gaining weight and I couldn’t stop it. I had stopped running in the morning for some time now and, though I had picked up tennis, it too soon ended. In short, I was not involved in any extra-curricular activities. All I did was attend classes, come home, and perhaps, chat for a little while. Most of my classmates were West Pakistanis but among them, there was one whom I enjoyed meeting. His name was Sulaiman, a fun person. One could not help but laugh at his words. Once, I think, when the Asian Games were taking place in Tokyo, Japan, Pakistan lost to India in hockey. Sulaiman cried his heart out as he heard the commentary on the radio. One had to see him to believe it. We went out to dinner that night but he refused to go. How could he digest such an insult on Pakistan!

Time passed swiftly by, and soon it was time for finals. I sat for my exams and knew I would pass. They could not make me fail.

Chapter Three

Starting Work: Joining The Engineers Limited

Two or three days after my exams, I packed up from Lahore and came to Dhaka in May of 1965. I had sent a telegram earlier, so when I landed at the airport, which was then in Tejgaon, I spotted Mejho Bhai waiting for me. He hugged me, and as we left the airport after collecting my luggage, he asked if I was interested in working. I answered, "Yes, why not – since I don't know when the army will call me."

Mejho Bhai said that of the five directors at The Engineers Limited, he knew one, Manzoor Shaheb who often visited Jessore. Mejho Bhai had already talked to him about a job for me. Manzoor Shaheb had told him to send me to his office. Mejho Bhai asked, "When will you go to meet him?" I said I would go the very next day.

"Won't you go to Jessore then?"

"I will, but later. It's more important that I get the job."

We stayed at Chapabu's. We called her husband "Bhai Shaheb," though his real name was Habibur Rahman. A very grave-looking person, he was quite friendly with me. He would ask me to accompany him when he went to buy groceries. He had an easy chair on the verandah where he would lie and read books for hours, but if I was around, he would chat with me – about local and international issues, about his books, about history – and I would listen closely to what he said. We would also eat together. In this house, even the simplest of fares would be served with great care, which I appreciated.

To Chapabu, I said, "I finished my exams and left. I'm not going back to Lahore."

She asked, "Won't you go back for your results?"

"No."

"Convocation?"

"Not even for that. I will never go that way again." Still, I had to go there once at a later time. I will come to that later.

Bu asked, "Where are you going to work?"

"Perhaps at The Engineers Limited."

She told me that she had heard of the firm. The office was located on Jinnah Avenue (now Bangabandhu Avenue).

I went to The Engineers Limited the next day. A man called Saidul told me to sit and went inside. I saw a large glass-paneled room where four people sat at their separate desks. All of them were elderly. I was summoned a few minutes later, so I entered and greeted them. Everyone in the room stared at me. Perhaps they were looking like that because I had bright, red cheeks and a head full of hair.

I was asked to sit and after I introduced myself, S R Khan Shaheb introduced himself and the others, Kashem Shaheb, Majid Shaheb, and Manzoor Shaheb. Then I said, "I took my finals at Lahore

Engineering University but the results aren't out yet." They looked at each other then. Kashem Shaheb asked, "Do you want a job? When can you join?" I replied, "Tomorrow."

Kashem Shaheb asked again, "You must have come from Lahore after one year. Wouldn't you like to go home first?"

"Sir, I can go later," I responded.

He asked, "Where will you stay?"

I said, "I haven't decided that yet, sir."

He then said, "We have a project site and there is an engineer there already. You can stay there too. The room is quite large and there is a cook too. It will be easier if you cook and eat together. The location is nearby, just opposite the Adamjee Court in Motijheel. A hotel is being constructed there, Hotel Purbani. We're the builders. If you want, you can go there today, or tomorrow if you wish. Saidul will take care of everything."

I was about to leave when S. R. Khan Shaheb asked, "You didn't ask about the salary." I replied, "Sir, I'm sure I'll receive the amount your company has determined."

"Still, you should know that at first, you will get 750 taka along with conveyance. All other expenses are yours. The company will take care of accommodation too."

When he finished, I looked at Manzoor Shaheb and thanked him. He knew why. I came out and Saidul took me to a room at the back. There were a few other people there. He introduced me and I shook hands with everyone. As I held out my hand to a tall, skinny, dark man, he said his name was Sanju. He was the site engineer for Purbani. I shook his hand and said, "I'll come to Purbani tomorrow and we'll meet again."

Saidul showed me the way out and as I climbed down the stairs, I saw a middle-aged gentleman in a suit and tie climbing up very slowly. I thought he might be the fifth director. I raised my hand in salam[42] and he looked at me over the top of his glasses. Then he asked, "How are you?" I replied, "I'm the new engineer, Shahid. I joined today."

When I told Chapabu about my job, she was delighted. Bhai Shaheb was happy too. I told them that I would be leaving for Purbani at six in the morning. It seemed as though that made them happier.

Early the next morning, I arrived at Purbani with my luggage. The site engineer, Sanju, came in a few minutes later and took me to the office. There, I went into the huge glass room. I was given a drawing board and a stool – this was to be my workstation. I was assigned some duties – every morning, I was to inspect the sites to ensure that construction was going according to plan. Then, I had to write a short progress report on each site and present that. My final task was to design a car port for Purbani Hotel. There was already a design but I still had to make another one. This was to be a little test for me.

Sanju took me to Polwel the following morning. Polwell was a police welfare organization and a cinema theater was to be constructed there. The work was in progress and after our inspection, we went to the NSC Building – a gym was to be built where the National Sports Council building now stood. The

[42] An Islamic form of greeting. Culturally, it is common for younger people to greet elders first as a sign of respect.

construction had just begun but we inspected this too. And, of course, there was Purbani. While we were at the National Sports Council, a jeep arrived, carrying a stern, elderly, stout gentleman. He climbed down from the jeep and asked, “Who’s in charge here?” Sanju went forward and replied, “Sir, he and I are in charge. We’re both engineers.”

There were two other men with the elderly gentleman, standing a little behind him. He turned to them and asked, “Have any measurements been taken of the distance of this building from the road?” They said, “Yes, sir.”

“Are they accurate?”

“Yes, sir. They are.”

The gentleman said, “Come back tomorrow. Measure it again and let me know.”

To us, he said, “The road is important. Today you see this almost hundred-foot wide road devoid of vehicles. People talk behind my back, call me mad. But one day, you yourselves will ask who was the designer of this place and why did he make the roads so narrow?”

For the first time, I saw him smile. Then he got in his car and drove away.

From NSC, we returned to Purbani. After breakfast, I went to the office. Sanju stayed mainly on the site, while I set to work at the office. A man, named Mujibur, used to come in after lunch. Much later, I found out that he was a relative of my father-in-law’s. He was an engineer. Apart from him, there were two or three others.

One Sunday after joining The Engineers Limited, I worked until two in the afternoon in the office. I came out and went to a restaurant directly opposite. The restaurant sold good parathas and mutton, so I ate there. I took a rickshaw from Purbani and set off for a place called Dhanmondi. I knew nothing about this place but Bashirul Haq, an architect who was with me in Lahore, had his home and office in Dhanmondi. I was going to meet him.

The office peon accompanied me to Bashirul’s house. It took a while to travel from Motijheel to Dhanmondi and we saw only a few cars and rickshaws on the way. Apparently, horse carriages used to travel along this route, but not anymore. Bashirul Haq was very happy to see me. He asked how things were in Lahore and I gave him as much news as I had. I inquired about his work. He said that the Tharianis had a lot of projects and a number of architects worked there. He was one of them.

He asked me to come another day during the regular hours and he would show me his office. I was also very interested in meeting the architects. We had tea and chatted for a while. Then as I looked for a rickshaw, Bashirul Haq said, “You won’t find a rickshaw at this hour. What you can do is go right from here, then take a left onto Saat Masjid Road. Cross that to Road No. 2. It’s not a big road but at the end of it, you may be able to find a rickshaw. And if you can’t, then take a right and a left from there onto Elephant Road. Follow your nose from there and when you get to Shahbagh Hotel, I’m sure you’ll find a rickshaw.”

So I followed his directions. I walked to Road No. 27, on to Sat Masjid Road to the lake. The Dhanmondi Lake reminded me of a classmate who was with me in the first year at Pakistan Engineering, Javed. He

had drowned in this lake. I took a good look at the lake when I arrived at Road No. 2. The erstwhile EPR gate stood to my right, the end of Dhanmondi Lake to my left. Several one-storied houses, surrounded by trees, stood in a row on the other side of the lake. The houses and greenery were a pleasure to see. Most of the plots were about a bigha in area with only a small or medium-sized house. The land around was left as is. I came to the culvert, through which the lake wound into the current BDR, but where a large mall stands today. I was just standing there when I saw a jeep approach. As it drew near, I saw Enamul Huq, an engineer from Engineers Limited, driving, a lady by his side. Through the window, I saw three girls in the backseat. Among them was the most beautiful girl. She (Ameenah) was sitting to the right of the jeep so I got a good look at her. I've seen many beautiful girls in this world – my world being limited to Jessore, Dhaka, Lahore, a few other places in Pakistan, and the cinema halls – but I thought this girl topped them all! The jeep passed me by and I turned around to stare after it until it went out of sight. The jeep took a right turn onto Road 2/A (then known as 13/4) and entered the gates of the last house on the lane. I walked on but the picture of a certain girl was etched in my head. It was an incredible feeling, immeasurable. I could think of nothing else as that face pushed all other thoughts out of my head. I determined that if I married, I would marry this girl.

After a few minutes wait, I got a rickshaw at the end of Road No. 2. I directed the rickshawallah to take me to Purbani. The rickshaw traversed Elephant Road, then Shahbagh, Ramna Garden, and the Secretariat on the right, but in my mind, I only saw a jeep, a girl inside that jeep, and an inordinately lovely face. I reached Purbani, and after paying the rickshawallah the two-taka fare, I went to my room and lay down, musing. Sanju was out. When he returned, we ate dinner together.

A picnic was arranged by The Engineers Limited the following Sunday. It was to take place somewhere around Savar. The firm would construct its corporate housing there, so some land had been acquired. There was a subscription fee for the picnic but I declined because I had a lot of work to do. So I would go in to the office on Sunday too.

I went to the office the next day. There was so much to do – I did everything that I was asked to. It wasn't like I did everything right. Could a new engineer do everything correctly? Did he even know how? But when the seniors came in after two, I got some help. Most of the seniors worked government jobs from seven to two. Then they came into The Engineers Limited to do a part-time shift. Most of their work was designing or tenders. That day, too, once everyone came in, talk of the picnic began. The conversation revealed that Enamul Huq's three daughters had attended the picnic. One colleague said their names were Ameenah, Taheerah, and Ameera. They were laughing as they said, "The girls speak English easily – not our cup of tea. Shahid speaks English – maybe he can find favor with his handsome face." I didn't join in but I had no trouble recognizing Enamul Huq's oldest daughter. All I could think of now was what everyone had said, "Shahid can find favor."

The next Sunday, I went to Narayanganj by bus to Mustafa Sarwar and Shiribu's house. I returned to Dhaka after lunch after spending a nice day with them. In the meantime, I heard that a school friend, Kamal, was also working for The Engineers Limited. He was currently in Khulna where a jute mill was being constructed.

I received 750 taka at the end of the month. My first salary! And yet, I had no expenses, so I sent 500 taka to Abba. I worked at this firm for six months, and I sent Abba the same amount during this time. Later,

when I went to the Pakistani Military Academy in Kakul, I would send Abba 100 taka from what I received.

One day, SR Khan called me to ask if I would be interested in going to Chandraghona in Chittagong where a rayon mill was under construction. I have said no to very few requests in my life when it came to work but never hesitated to refuse if it was something useless – this was the rule I lived by. I replied, "I don't have a problem." Majid Shaheb was there too. He said that he was working there now and I would be working for him. I agreed. SR Khan instructed Saidul to make all the arrangements so that I could travel to Kaptai's Chandraghona after I reached Chittagong. I asked for a three-day leave so I could visit Jessore before moving to Chandraghona. By evening, I had been granted a five-day leave including Sunday. I bought a PIA ticket from the PIA office opposite Purbani, but it was a standby ticket. In other words, I could travel only if there was an available seat.

Luckily, I got a seat and after landing at Jessore Airport, I took a rickshaw home. Mejho Bhai worked at the PIA office in Jessore, which was by the bank of Rajpukur close to our house.I hugged Abba and Ma when I reached home. Abba was not very expressive, but Ma was very happy. Hasnu, Hasan, Moin, Rekha – everyone was excited to see me at home early in the morning. Abba would wake up while it was still dark. He would take a two to four mile walk before returning home. On his way home, he would sometimes buy some butter or some shondesh[43] from the sweetmeat shop. He had no need to tutor anyone anymore. Seeing me, Abba donned his panjabi and pajama, took his umbrella, and went out again. Even though he would walk to the market, he would return in a rickshaw, and he would hold the umbrella over the rickshawallah's head. Abba had retired now. He spent his time now in praying five times a day, morning walks, reading, writing, and letter writing. He would read even old letters. *The Ittefaq* arrived by the first flight and the morning was spent in reading the paper. He would get national and international news on the one o'clock news. After lunch, he rested. Once the late afternoon prayer was over, he would sit in an easy chair outside and chat.

Abba would talk to us about everything except religion and politics. These chats would go on until the evening prayer. He would then have a light meal with Horlicks or coconut water. But he would have a large cup of tea in the morning – with four or five spoons of sugar and milk. We had to buy the milk these days as I had said goodbye to my cow by now so that Hasan and Moin didn't have to do what I did.

One day I went to Khadki to Mejho Chacha's house, which was always a treat. Mejho Chacha was a fun-loving man and we would sit by the pond on the concrete benches by the ghat to talk. However, I returned before dark so I could have dinner with Abba. Food was served right after the evening prayer. There was a maidservant who helped Ma. Abba sat at a separate table, eating one piece of local chicken, one piece of a potato, and he would pour a cup of milk in his plate, soak a piece of bread in it to eat. At most, he ate 2 pieces of bread and no vegetables at night. My father and uncles ate very little and they maintained a surprisingly strict routine.

I spent three days in Jessore and went to Khulna. Hasan, who worked at Star Jute Mill, lived there with Boro Bhai, whose children, Jolly, Milly, Naila, Jamil, and Javed, were very happy to see me.

[43] A sweetmeat made with ricotta cheese

In the morning when we sat down to breakfast, I saw Bhabi rolling out flatbreads continuously. On the table were a huge bowl of potato hash and one of semolina (shooji). Boro Bhai had already eaten twelve flatbreads with four eggs. The hash and shooji were not spared either. The children were a close second. In spite of this, I was told that Boro Bhai lacked nutrition and was unable to provide nutritious food for his children because he had to send 100 taka home. And yet, a tin full of biscuits would be gone within a couple of days. Sometimes, Boro Bhai would let out a sigh and say, "I have to do everything for the Jessore home and so my children go hungry and wear poor clothes." The children heard this and believe it to this day. It's not possible to match this with reality at all. Boro Bhai must have had some hidden costs and he got away by blaming that on Jessore. I have seen my Boro Bhai and his family in good health and clothes, eating good food.

No one is deprived except Bill Gates. Then why did I have to hear that because he had to do everything for Jessore, he couldn't do anything for himself, and therefore, for his children?

Boro Bhai had always enjoyed himself and still does. I remembered that between his IA and BA exams, Boro Bhai forced Ma to give him all the money she had stored away in a pillow so he could go to Calcutta with Mejho Bhai. Another time, when the Pakistan cricket team with Karder as its captain, came to play against West Indies, he went to enjoy the match with Akram Bhai. Later, when he worked at Crescent, he took his fill of the club. He had even shown me. He told me that if one wanted to rise in life, one needed these things. However, it's true that Boro Bhai truly wanted his younger siblings to do well.

The following day I went to meet Kamal at his jute mill, which he was constructing out of his own sense of responsibility. Kamal showed me around the area and the jute mill. We also spoke to a few people. Everyone praised Kamal as a good engineer.

That same night I boarded a rocket,[44] which started off at 10 pm. I reached Sadarghat by morning and after leaving my luggage at Purbani, I went to the office. I had already packed most of my things at work. Now I packed up the rest, and discovered that Saidul had already made arrangements for my travel from Chittagong to Chandraghona. The driver met me at the station and he quickly took me to the rest house where, after a cup of tea and a ten-minute break, I headed out to sightsee. The driver was from Chittagong and he knew the roads well. After an hour, he said there's nothing else to see in Chittagong. I especially liked the Batali Hills, but due to a lack of time, I couldn't visit the beach.

I showered after returning to the rest house. During the summer, it was my habit to shower two to three times a day.

Dinner was a meal of vegetables, dal, mutton, and plain rice. I mixed the vegetables and mutton with the rice and took a bite. Slowly I stood up. I cannot begin to describe how spicy that food was – I felt as though even the top of my head was on fire. I was starving and I needed to eat something. Finally, I had just a couple of pieces of meat with dal. The next morning when the chef asked what I would like for breakfast, I said, "Two pieces of toast, bread, butter, tea, and an omelet with two eggs." I told the chef that I ate omelets with no spice.

I set off the next morning. The driver informed me that it was possible to make a round trip to Kaptai at night but during the day, it would take almost an hour and a half longer, although the distance was not too

[44] A motorized boat, also known as a launch, which can carry many passengers.

much. The road to Kaptai is beautiful. The car sped along, no one else but us on the road. There were, at the most, probably two to three hundreds cars altogether in Chittagong. The roadsides seemed to grow more beautiful as we passed along, and the last eight or ten kilometers were the best of all. We had to travel about four kilometers through a thick forest before coming to a halt in front of our temporary office. Majid Shaheb was apparently inside and the other engineers were at the site. I went in to Majid Shaheb's office – it was filled with drawings and books - he sat in their midst.

He looked up as I walked in and he invited me to sit when I greeted him. He brought me up to date with the work being done here and said that a senior engineer would give me the details. He took me to the hall room where all the engineers had their desks. This was where they worked or inspected designs to ensure that work was going according to the plans. Work included things like laying foundations, casting, and so on. I would have to begin work the very next morning.

I left for the engineers' resthouse to unpack and then sat waiting for the others to return and get introduced. There was Nilu Bhai and Nazim Uddin. The latter had sat for the ISSB with me and passed. He was supposed to go to Lahore with me but he wasn't called. We were happy to see each other.

After lunch, everyone rested and then went to their respective sites. Although they all worked at the office in the morning, they still had to first ensure that work had begun on the sites. This expansive rayon mill was being constructed on the banks of the Karnaphuli River in Chandraghona. Within a day or two, I understood how large this project was – a 16 crore project. I also learned that the project was owned by the Daud family, the richest among the twenty-one richest families in Pakistan.

One day, Daud Shaheb himself appeared on the project site, in his walking shoes, accompanied by Kashem Shaheb and Majid Shaheb. He was inspecting the work from site to site with the two of them. He was also taken to the area where the main casting was going on. All the engineers had been asked to be on site and we exchanged greetings with Daud Shaheb. He was a little stout and brushed his hair to the wrong side of his head. He was dressed in an ordinary shirt and pants. Who could tell that he was the richest of the twenty-one families?

Time passed in this manner. We would visit Chittagong once a week or, failing that, once every two weeks, in the evening. The New Market had just been constructed with just a few shops and a theater. The theater mostly featured Pakistani movies, but sometimes a Bangladeshi film or two would be shown. Movies also came in from India. Sometimes we returned to Chandraghona by 11 or 12 at night after watching a movie. The roads were safe.

Days passed, watching others work, learning some work myself, and being confused by other work as it was rather difficult – for example, the civil work in a chemical plant.

Suddenly one day, I received orders to report to the Pakistan Military Academy. I had no idea what this was about but I had heard about the Academy from friends and lieutenants who came to study engineering. When word about this spread at the rayon mill, I realized that I rose in everyone's estimation. At that time, anyone connected with the West and East Pakistan Army was highly respected. Ayub was in power and the military ruled. Anyway, after receiving the letter, I returned to Dhaka and went to The Engineers Limited office. I met with Kashem Shaheb and S. R. Khan Shaheb, informing them of the letter from the

Academy. They were happy and encouraging. They stood up and said, “You’re now a prospective army officer. Your status is high!”

I took their blessings and went into the back room. Everyone was at lunch and the room was empty. I thought of waiting till two o’clock until everyone returned, so I could ask for their blessings too. While waiting, I put a small photo of mine under the glass covering of ARM Enamul Huq’s table. I was sure that he would show it to Mrs. Huq who would then show it to Miss Huq (Ameenah). When everyone returned after lunch, I bade farewell and left.

The next morning, I bought a plane ticket to Jessore as a civilian scholar (army). I had some work at the office, and there, from Saidul, I learned that Enamul Huq Shaheb had already taken my photo home yesterday. He must have understood why I had placed my photo there. I believed that he had taken the photo home to show his wife.

I reached Jessore on the evening flight. It was September 6, 1965. Everyone at home was excited, although there was a tinge of sadness about. I was going far away again! Nonetheless, when I lived close, I visited just once a year. Now it would be no different.

The next morning I learned that a war had begun between India and Pakistan. Everyone was worried that I had to join the army at this time. Mejho Bhai himself bought me a ticket to Lahore. War surrounded us, but regardless, I went to Boro Bhai’s home in Khulna. What I saw there made me think that the war there was centered around him. Whenever the siren went off, he would gather his family and hide under the dining table. People from the other apartments also showed up. We had a relative in the Air Force. Boro Bhai had assigned him to dig a trench. What preparations for war! For as long as the siren warning lasted, Boro Bhai sat under the table and recited holy verses loudly. If he stopped, a Hindu family who was also there, would say, “Islam Shaheb, please continue.” And Boro Bhai would oblige.

After one night’s stay, despite his protests, I climbed into a rocket steamer. Everyone used the rockets at that time – they were punctual, safe, and served good food to passengers in first-class. English breakfast, then lunch and dinner made my journey a satisfying one.

Chapter Four

Joining the Army

As soon as I reached Dhaka, I went to Chapabu's house. Everyone here knew that I was going to join the army, which was considered quite prestigious and worthy. My estimation in everyone's eyes increased and I began to receive salams.

By this time, the jet plane had been launched and the older super constellation was no longer in service. On a jet plane, it took a mere two and half hours to Lahore where previously it would take six. I reached Lahore without any trouble and put up with a friend. The Indo-Pak War, which had lasted just six days, had ended by now as neither country had the resources or the desire to continue fighting.

From Lahore I had to travel to the Kakul Military Academy in Abbottabad. En route was the Hasan Abdal Cadet College in Pindi. I set off on the night coach for the Academy which was located near the neat little hill station of Abbottabad. It was a Sunday, a weekend. I took a tanga[45] from the station to the Academy, showed my pass, and entered. Alighting from the tanga, I wondered what I was to do next. I already knew that training here was trouble. I decided that I wouldn't care to listen to anyone because I knew everything already. And no matter what I did, they couldn't lay a hand on me. They would scream and yell. They would order me to do this or that, run or jump, but I would do nothing. I had already decided that I wouldn't serve in the army.

As I stood thinking, an extremely well-poised man suddenly stopped by me on his way past, and asked in English where I wanted to go. I replied, "Khaled Hall." I'm not sure whether he understood, but he suddenly grabbed my bag and said, "Come with me." I picked up my side bag and followed.

It was a hilly area and we had to climb upwards. We took a right turn and came to stand in front of a barrack. He put my bag down and asked whom I wanted to meet. I then explained who I was and why I was there. He appeared to be thoroughly stunned. Apparently, he had thought I was a student or the older brother of a cadet. He began to curse in very colorful language, only one of which I shall speak of here for respectability's sake: "You bloody fool…!" I cannot say or write any of the others.

He gave in finally and showed me an empty room: "First put your bags in there and then I'll see to you." He told me his name as he went out: Zayedi. He was our Sergeant Major and the leader of my platoon. He was also a cadet and had arrived here just six months before. His attitude, however, befitted the father of Emperor Akbar! I went into the room and thought of donning my sleeping suit. This would surely drive him mad. He wouldn't listen to anything. So, invariably, I put on my sleeping suit over my underwear and lay down. And, predictably, he went insane. He began to scream as I turned towards the wall and stayed put. He let me know what he would do and what he was capable of doing. He would see how I stayed at the Academy as he was not one to let things go. I think he grew tired of shouting and left the room. I shut the door and laughed to myself for a while. My body felt light. I lay back down, my head resting on my arm. I was thinking about the incident when Zayedi reappeared with his gang. The ten or twelve of them acted as though they would swallow me whole. I said nothing. Instead, I turned over onto my stomach and lay still. They couldn't touch me or my bed but they did everything else. The room seemed fit to explode.

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[45] Horse-drawn cart

Then, as they left, they declared that this would be dealt with by dinnertime. Soon after, my batman, Dilshad, arrived. He was a Pathan.

Dilshad began to list everything that Zayedi might and would do. He said, "That Zayedi Shaheb is our boss. He might complain about you to the platoon commander." Dilshad had been working here for a long fifteen years but, he said, he had never met anyone like me. He warned me to be careful, "*Saabji*, please listen just a little to them. Today is a weekend, so the jury was small. Just wait and see what happens here tomorrow."

He had unpacked my bag by this time and was putting things in their place. Tomorrow, he said, my uniform would be assigned and in which I would learn my lessons here. The clothes I had brought, though, would still be useful. He also told me that room assignments were already made. Then he handed me my dinner outfit. He took me to the verandah and pointed out the drawing/dining room, saying, "Go and eat. I'm leaving now and will be back at five in the morning."

Once my batman Dilshad left, I thought of skipping dinner, but I was starving. I had eaten some bread and fried fish at Hasan Abdal. The fish fry at Hasan Abdal was famous. Pieces of large rui or katol fish were deep fried in a huge wok and those who loved this fry flocked to these shops at least once a year. I was deep in thought as I walked to the dining hall. Zayedi and his gang had promised redress before dinner even though they had already done plenty. The only thing left was to fry me with oil and pepper, and eat me up.

I arrived at the barrack pointed out to me by my batman. As soon as I entered the ante-room, a roar arose. Zayedi rushed to me and cursed me as before. He began with "You bloody fool!" and continued with choice words from his personal dictionary. Dinner was served at eight but it was only seven-thirty then. Apart from the ante-room, there was no other room to sit in besides the dining room. Patiently, I took it all in and entered the dining hall at eight. After dinner, I returned to my room and went to bed. I was so tired that I didn't know when a deep sleep overwhelmed me. I had no idea when dawn arrived. Suddenly, I heard, "*Saabji*, wake up!" Dilshad had come. He said, "The whistle will go off soon. I've brought some tea and biscuits. Eat up, then shave and shower." Even though I hurried, the whistle and yelling began outside before I could finish. I was forced to present myself in civil dress. The Sergeant looked at me and said, "You're late! Ok – go and bring your clothes. Your batman will take you to the tailor and the barber to cut your hair. And make sure your shoes fit. Wear them a few times and check."

He let me go and went off with the rest. Later, my batman informed me that there was no way to escape this Sergeant. I'd have to be with him entirely during office hours except when I had class, PT, or drills. He would take me to the dining hall, to parades, to PT, drills, and classes.

I finished with the tailor and barber by noon. I would get my clothes by evening. My batman said, "You'll have to get measured several more times because in a few days, you won't have this body anymore."

By evening, I had everything. I was then taken to my platoon commander. He was a short, handsome man. He spoke in clear, plain English. Major Zafar Masud. He said, "Listen. You'll get a commission for whatever you do. If you sleep for six months, I'll give you a commission. But if you're planning to leave here, that's not going to happen. So the smart thing would be to do as you're told. You'll have to follow all the rules of this place and I believe you can do so."

He released me after this and I understood that he had already received a complaint. I came back to my room and realized that the platoon commander was right. So, from tomorrow, I would follow all the rules and do well here. Life went on as it does in a military academy – I don't wish to go into details about this here. I studied and exercised. Exercises included nine-mile runs, two-mile runs, PT, body-building, drills. I did everything. Soon I lost 30-40 pounds. I was back to the weight I had been when I first came to Lahore. I had to have my clothes refitted several times. Soon it was time for the final results. I came fifth in my class. After the Passing Out Parade, I became an Officer.

I would have missed out on a lot of things had I never come to the Pakistan Military Academy and experienced all these ups and downs. PMA had succeeded in enlightening me. My experiences there are enough to fill a book.

There were many memorable people at the Academy, but the most notable were my platoon commander, Major Zafar Masud and my batman, Dilshad. I could never forget them. It is impossible to quite describe Platoon Commander Zafar Masud but Dilshad, for the six months I spent at the Academy, came to wake me up, rain or shine, every day at five. His words, "*Saabji*, wake up. The whistle will go off now!" still ring in my ears.

First Posting: Murree and Azad Kashmir

My first posting was at Murree (which was a hill station near Rawalpindi). I was to report to the Bartram Division. Akbar was posted with me to this Division too and the two of us presented ourselves at the battalion headquarters on arrival. We met Major Imtiaz there and learned that the CO Shaheb was waiting inside. There were several others, from different parts of Azad Kashmir, waiting there as well. At the end of the day, I found out that I was to actually be at Muzaffarabad.

I reached Muzaffarabad and on the way, saw where the Jhelum River and the Neelum River met. The water of the Neelum River was blue but the Jhelum River was muddy. The two rivers travelled in this state for a distance until their confluence finally ended in the Kabul River. This River then merged with the Sindhu River. The Neelum River veered right and flowed into the distance towards India. Its water came in from different tributaries in India while the Jhelum was sourced from the direction of Srinagar. In the olden days, the path along the Jhelum River was the only route to Srinagar, and for decades, the kings and emperors of Lahore, Agra, and Delhi used it for their travels. The subtle mark of the British had been left here too: some of the bridges over the tributaries were built above the water, and some that passed through the water. The British treated the Irish similarly as inferior.

The car turned right from Muzaffarabad. So the mountains now appeared to our left and the river to our right. Along the way, we passed some English, and some Irish bridges. The British had named these bridges. A little further along by the bank of the river was a steep hill, the Pir Chinasi. The car turned right and entered the Ojhri Camp, or Tokhri Camp. The Tokhri Camp was like a "tukri," a basket – a valley in the middle of the mountains surrounding it. That is where my office, my home, and the barracks were. Everything was close at hand. Once the driver unloaded the luggage, an enormously tall man came rolling out of the house and yelled that his name was Aahaladita. He was the waiter/manager of this mess. He couldn't stop smiling at the sight of me. To his right appeared another incredibly tall man, obviously a Punjabi. He was Lieutenant Mazhar. I saluted him but in return, he engulfed me in his arms. He kept

saying how happy he was to see me. As he pulled me along by the hand, he said, “The OC, Commanding Officer Major Shukur Shaheb, is waiting for you. Come.”

The door was already open but still he knocked before entering with me. Major Shaheb looked up. A handsome, though short man, with neatly combed hair, the Major had no facial hair. He smiled and shook my hand, asking me to sit. Mazhar left and the Major began to question me. He said that he had not had a chance to visit Mashriki Pakistan. He had a jovial tone filled with laughter and curiosity. He said, “If you wish, you may relax or you may work. There is no one to supervise you nor to order you. But, if you want to advance your career, you will need to be responsible and do your own work. There is work if you think there is, none if you think so too. You must seek out your own work.” Of course, hardworking people always find something to do.

I found all this quite entertaining. Then he talked about the sad state of the camp. Everyone had been at war and the camp had been vacant. The winter had come after the summer and there was occasional snow. It rained a lot here too, so the conditions of the houses was not good. The mess was not in good condition either, but the troops were there. All construction here was of clay and tin. I might be required to go the full length of the camp. There was a tin bungalow by the riverbank. He lived there with his wife, son and daughter. He liked it here. Sometimes he went home on vacation, sometimes to Pindi on duty. He had relatives there. Once he finished, I saluted once again and left the room. Mazhar was in the next room and the 2IC Maksud sat on the other side. The latter was a captain. Mazhar informed me that Captain Maksud was preparing for his exam at the Staff College, and then he took me to my room. It was a single room for me, made of clay. The roof was constructed of rafters and mud, but there was a fireplace in the room. Two small windows and a door that shut with a chain – no one locked their doors here. The room was equipped with a bed, a clotheshorse, and a table.

We proceeded to the mess to eat. Aahaladita was all-in-one. The choice was either beef or vegetables, with the beef cooked with potatoes or peas. Or there was minced mutton, sometimes with potatoes, with some yogurt and flatbread on the side. Mazhar asked Aahaladita to make some rice for dinner for me. After eating, Mazhar said, “Get some rest and I will too. See you in the afternoon. We’ll take a walk along the road and get some exercise as well as fresh air.”

I fell asleep as soon as I lay down. Aahaladita woke me up around four-thirty with a cup of tea and some snacks. After my tea, I got ready for my walk. Mazhar soon arrived and during our walk, he provided me with a lot of information: where I could play sports, where to see the Indian border from, where I would fall within their firing range, where they would be at our trespass point, etc.

Regular office work began the next day. Mazhar visited me sometimes in my office to show me which were the in files, the out files, the source of the letters, which were letters for the headquarters, or for the brigade, and whatever else was needed. From a pile of books there, he gave me one on British law along with an Acts and Rules book. A naik named Razzak was on duty at the office, very efficient and smart. One day, he announced, “The OC is coming tomorrow. There is a parade in the morning and you have to be there. He will introduce you to the troops.”

The next day I went to my first parade as an Officer. The OC Shaheb arrived, his clothes spruced up and his beret shiny clean. He inspected the parade. The troops stood to one side and he stood at an angle directly before them with us standing a little farther off. The 2IC was absent so Mazhar accepted the

parade from the subedar after which he proceeded to hand it over to the OC Shaheb. The OC Shaheb spoke a word or two in a serious tone, then called me forward. I went to stand next to him and he introduced me to the troops. That was the end of the parade.

The next day, 2IC Maksud Shaheb came and I realized from the way he spoke that he was an Urdu-speaking Indian. He would move to the Staff College next year so he wasn't too interested in the company now. Lieutenant Mazhar showed me around the entire unit one day. There were three clay C-style buildings with a kitchen and dining room on one side. Roll calls were conducted at night and everyone gave briefings. The next day's duties were also declared. I noticed that the camp was quite dilapidated. The clay buildings were crumbling but the quarter guard seemed okay even though it too was made of clay and tin. The arms and ammunition were stored in a room like this. The kitchen was shabby and dirty. Food items were strewn here and there. Dirty water from the kitchen drained everywhere causing waterlogs. Even the used water from the jawans' bathroom drained everywhere. Kitchen trash was tossed about five or seven yards away. These rotted in a few days and stank bringing in countless flies and mosquitoes. There was a basketball court but it was filled with gravel. I didn't think anyone played there although some PT exercises were conducted. Some training of sorts also took place. I realized that I would have to get close to the jawans and then brainwash them. I would make them agree to first fix the barracks. We would need to polish all the mud walls and floors. We needed to clean the area and put pipes in the bathrooms for drainage. This was the land of rocks and sand – the water would dry up instantly.

Surprisingly, everyone agreed unanimously. So I took them to the kitchen so they could see its condition for themselves. We decided to get a covered drum for the garbage so that no flies could get to it. We would fit a showcage here for the water. Everyone agreed and the Subedar Shaheb was elated. Teams and committees were quickly formed comprising everyone from jawans to subedars. All types of teams were included in the committees and I put all the projects in writing. Mazhar was on board as well. 2IC Shaheb had no interest in anything, so I explained the project to OC Major Shukur Shaheb one day and he was happy about it.

Work began and within a month, the environment became so wonderful that everyone was ecstatic. Next, teams were formed and basketball games began. Mazhar was all praises for me. During the rainy season, I planted some trees. To do so, I had to collect soil from here and there to fill up the holes dug in the rocky land.

And every afternoon, I would go out of the unit onto the road to run a mile and come back walking. I'd exercise a little, and once a week, we would climb the rocky hills. They were about two to three thousand feet high and both paths, up and down, were hard to maneuver as our feet slipped. Even if we didn't slip on the way up, quite a number of us would roll down. This was like a game for us and everyone had fun. This is how my days were spent.

Apparently, every Saturday, OC Major Shukur Shaheb had duty at the GHQ as well. But who knew where he actually went! He gave us whatever excuses he had made at home – smiling mischievously all the time. But he would arrive very early on Monday morning. One day, he invited me for dinner along with the DM. The Brigade Major came with his wife and we met Major Shukur's wife and children. His wife was a beauty from Uttar Pradesh. His children were beautiful too. They went to school in Muzaffarabad. He had arranged for a car on payment for the children's commute. The home-cooked food was plentiful and

delicious. The DM Shaheb was quite pleased to meet me for the first time, even though he had had dinner here before. Maksud Shaheb couldn't come because he was studying but Mazhar made up for it by eating for ten. It was quite late by the time we got back because there was drinking. DM Shaheb and Shukur Shaheb had a lot to drink and only stopped when they grew immobile. Mazhar and I refrained from it all.

One day an interesting thing happened. Major Shaheb had gone to Jhelum or thereabouts when someone from there notified his wife who came and caught him red-handed. On their return, his wife clearly told him she wouldn't stay with him any longer. Major Shaheb took down the Quran from the shelf and swore that he never did anything. His wife had been mistaken in what she had seen or heard. He had no second wife in Jhelum, and so on. A number of days later when the Major's wife took the Quran down from the shelf to read, she discovered that inside was actually a book of law. The Major had borrowed the book from me. When the Major returned home, there was a ruckus. Mazhar got all the updates from the Major's son who was very close to him. The boy was in Class Eight. I would then hear about all the juicy details from Mazhar.

One evening, on receiving a confidential message, I set off for Major Shukur's home. I had seen the house at night but the daytime view surprised me. It was an incredibly beautiful mountain home. I was told that Shaheb and Memshaheb had gone down to the riverbank. The Neelum River took a sharp turn at this point and curved around the mountain to the other side. What a crashing sound the waves made at that curve! The snow-covered Pir Chinasi Mountain lay on the other side of the river and on this side lay large wide rocks. As I edged forward in search of Major Shukur, I caught sight of him playing hide-and-seek with his wife among the rocks. The scene took me by surprise, and not wishing to disturb their fun, I decided to leave.

Brigade Commander, Brigadier Nasrullah hailed from Madras. He sent for me one day. Handing me a cup of tea, he asked, "The rumor is that your unit does not have any flies or mosquitoes. Is this true?" I replied, "Yes, sir. It's true." He asked, "How did you do it? I also heard that you've spruced up the place." I said, "Yes, that's true too."

"Where did you learn such things? I don't think the Pakistan Military Academy teaches such things!"

I said, "Sir, I learned this at my home in Jessore. We have a small home and there is a tiny vegetable patch there. We also have a flower garden in front. It is all very neat and clean – like a picture."

He listened with rapt attention, then said that he would visit my unit to see for himself. And true to his word, he showed up one day at my unit with the BM and all the battalion commanders in tow. They came in several cars and the OC (Officer Commanding) received them. We were there too.

Brigadier Shaheb walked down, carefully inspecting everything. Then he told the BM (Brigade Major), the DQK, and the other battalion commanders that they too could look around the unit. They were especially searching for mosquitoes and flies. After 15-20 minutes of wandering around, they reported back that there were no flies. Brigadier Shaheb said, "So it's possible to do this then! I want all my battalions and units to be like this."

EME's OC Captain Naim Shaheb had also come and we served them all tea. Before leaving, the Brigadier came forward to shake my hand and say, "Well done!" Later, I heard that he was a man of few words, read a lot, and lived a disciplined, simple life. If one needed to learn how to obey rules, Brigadier Nasrullah

was the man to follow. He invited me for dinner one night. I informed the OC about this and learned that only I had been invited. OC Shaheb arranged a car for me.

The Brigadier's home was made of stone, with a tin roof. He came downstairs to welcome me himself. We sat in the drawing room where I met his wife and children. After a while, he told his children to go to bed. By this time, they had already finished their homework and dinner. Brigadier Shaheb showed me his library which was laden with books. The weather here was very cold, and yet the house had no carpet. Neither were there any chandeliers. There were some table lamps though, and some of the normal lights provided by the MES. There were no fans, although the heat could be intense on some days in the summer. After the tour, we came back to the drawing room from where his wife took us to the dining room. There was dal with tamarind, a light soup with tamarind, vegetables, and rice. That was it. After dinner, there was kheer. Then the Brigadier escorted me to the jeep. I salaamed and left. I couldn't quite understand then, nor now, why I had even been invited that day.

A few days after this, I heard that General Atiqur Rahman, Adjutant General, would be coming to Muzaffarabad to inspect the engineering company. He would most likely inspect other areas as well. So we prepared ourselves. But there was one problem. We couldn't control Shukur Shaheb. As usual, he disappeared on Saturday night on his unknown mission and was supposed to be back by Monday morning. But we were worried about whether he would return before the General arrived. So the Brigade Major arrived for duty in place of the OC. However, at exactly nine, the OC's car arrived and we breathed a sigh of relief. There was a little space next to the office where the OC sat in an armed chair, fully naked, with a smile on his face. The batman, Aahaladita, set to work and within ten minutes, the OC Shaheb was ready in shiny clothes, shoes, and cap. He said loudly, "No tension! Relax!" In the meantime, the troops had lined up according to platoons. At exatly ten o' clock, General Atiq arrived in our midst. This was the first time I saw him up close. Behind him stood the Brigade Commander, and behind him was the DQ (Divisional Quarter Master) and several other officers.

We saluted. Then he began the rounds and found everything to his satisfaction. He had already visited one or two other units since morning and had found them lacking. He asked, "I heard that some new officer has done all this. Who is he?" OC Shaheb, with great enthusiasm, pulled me forward by the hand. General Atiq shook my hand and simply said, "Well done." He too had a serious, reticent nature.

There was a brigade headquarter in Muzaffarabad near which was the EME company. Mazhar and I sometimes visited there. We would spend time chatting, eating and drinking there.

There were dinner parties here or there on most Saturday nights. Everyone would come. Extreme winter had set in and fireplaces stayed lit all the time. It was difficult to move around outside but all the parties were successful as there was plenty of drink which some devoured limitlessly.

Once Major Shukur got Major Zafar as drunk as a barrel of wine and took him home. As he took one step out of the jeep, he spied his wife standing in the doorway with a broom. Major Zafar screamed, "This isn't my house!" His wife retorted, "Well, I'm your wife. Now get down! Shukur Bhai, just push him out and I'll empty his barrel!"

Some of our mining troops were out. They had just begun work but a couple of them had died already while others had been hurt. Once they returned, a new group would be sent out. Most of our work was

outdoors – checking the roads and bridges, looking for possible alternative routes, figuring out how to increase existing roads (not in width, but going forward). This involved a lot of travel. One day, the OC summoned Mazhar and me to say, “Fox One, Fox Two, and Fox Three. These are all mountains but in three parts. We have to get from one to the other. Past Fox Three, there is a slope down to a river, then a valley and another mountain. Once you climb this hill, you can see Srinagar. I haven’t seen it myself because it was always cloudy. Investigate whether we can get a road to Fox One.”

We set off, passing the Jhelum River on our left and a mountain on our right. A little later, we spied the white peaks of mountains. We could also see several waterfalls, small, medium, and huge. Some of them could even be heard from the distance. We came to a stop after passing by the village of Ghori-Du’patta. There was an ancient love story about this village which the old villagers would tell to any newcomer from the town. Du’patta was the beautiful daughter of the local king and she fell in love with a flute-playing cowherd. Their love endured for a time but ended in death. The two of them one day hung themselves from a tree onto the Jhelum River. That is why this bend in the road was known as Ghori-Du’patta.

Mazhar knew the place and he asked the driver to stop at the right place. We had food with us as it would take about three or four hours to complete the tour. It was eight in the morning. There was a bridge but it wasn’t in any condition for a car to travel over, so we walked across. There was no road on this side from where we could hear the thunder of the river. The current flowed dangerously and the thunderous sound was enough to make one shiver. We took a right turn after crossing the river and clinging to the side of the mountain, we began our walk. It was a three or four-foot wide stone path. And at one point, we came upon a waterfall. The mountain had sunk in at that point, rather like an upside-down D, probably due to the water running down it for thousands of years. The water fell in torrents and splashed upwards for about two hundred feet. Some of the water fell on our path too. We crossed the fall swiftly but still got a little wet. Then we turned around and watched it for some time. It was amazing and I wondered whose hand had created such beauty.

About a mile or two later, the path grew narrow. The roaring of the river seemed to be coming from our right. We were near the end of the path when it turned left. Another path led to the right along the mountainside. As I turned left, Mazhar stopped me and said, “The road will go along the mountainside with the river on the other. So the road will be in-between. Just like the path we crossed.”

As I followed him, I saw some goats on the mountain and asked, “Whose goats are these?” Mazhar replied, “They’re mountain goats.” In other words, no one owned them. But we soon discovered this wasn’t true. A few feet ahead, we met a man standing on the mountain with two or three of the goats. How could this man stand on the side of the mountain? I asked Mazhar, “How on earth did he get there?” Mazhar said, “They’re mountain folk. It’s not a big deal for them.”

We ploughed on but our shoes had no grip, and we were more or less stuck. We couldn’t go forward nor back. The two of us stood there, clinging to the mountain. I said, “Sir, this is bad. Ask that man below us where the road is.”

Mazhar knew a bit of the language but I have no idea what the two of them said. All I could guess was that the man had said, “What? You can’t find the path? You’re standing on it! That’s the goat path.”

God help us if this was indeed the road! I said, “Sir, let’s go back.” Mazhar said, “How can we do that? There’s no grip and we can’t possibly turn around!”

Very painfully, after fifteen minutes, we managed to turn. By then, we were raining sweating despite the cold weather. Only Allah could save us – He was the owner of life and death. Praying under our breaths, we finally made it to the three feet wide road. As soon as we were on solid ground, Mazhar began to laugh. Apparently, he had had a lot of fun. I fumed silently, “We were about to die and he says he had fun!”

We rested for a little while and decided that we would have to return today to come back another day. On the way back, to our left, we suddenly spied a rope bridge. Mazhar was excited. “We didn’t even see this bridge! Come on, why should we walk so far? We can cross right here.”

Mazhar was very pleased with himself for having spotted the bridge. But he didn’t notice that the bridge was not in use and no one was crossing it. There were supposed to be two people at either end. When the villagers needed to cross, these two men would call to each other to pull the passengers across. At the same time, they also acted as guards. After some loud calling, one man emerged and after some discussion, it was decided that being the junior, I would cross first.

A rope bridge meant that a plank of wood hung from the rope. The passenger would sit on the plank and the guard would pull the rope to help him cross. The other guard would need to pull from the opposite bank simultaneously for the passenger to eventually reach the other side. Sometimes, an extra person or two would show up and help to pull the passenger. I, however, was not too comforted by the sight of the wood plank, but Mazhar’s enthusiasm drove me to call on Allah and recite the *Surah Fateha* before stepping onto the plank. Soon, I began to move. The plank reeled from one side to the other. As the reeling increased, the world grew dark before my eyes. By the time I was at the middle of the river, I felt as though all the winds in the world were blowing against me. And the plank of wood on which I stood snapped 10-12 feet in one direction and then another. I was in serious trouble. Finally, having gone through all the prayers I knew, the rope bridge journey ended. My legs gave way under me when I climbed off the plank and my entire body felt numb. Still, I stood tall, giving Mazhar on the other side the impression that I was just fine. He called to me, “How was it?” I shouted back, “Very relaxing! I’ve never had such fun in my life.”

Fully reassured, Mazhar climbed onto the plank, weighing it down with his 220 pounds of body weight. I was just 120 pounds. Imagine how it would be with his 220! It looked like the plank wouldn’t move at first and I felt disappointed but suddenly it accelerated, bobbing in the water. My excitement grew because as soon as the plank began to move, Mazhar started to scream. Halfway along, the plank stopped and then began moving again. If it came 20 feet in one direction, it went 20 feet in another. That is, if it rose to the sky in one direction, it fell to the surface in the other. To steady the plank, the man stopped pulling on the rope but then, to rescue Mazhar, a few other hands were called in to help. They all seemed to be enjoying the task of pulling at the rope, as was I. Those who knew a bit of Urdu said, “The Lieutenant Shaheb is in big trouble!” and in the midst of it all, Mazhar bellowed at me. He kept threatening me with dire consequences once he reached the shore. I was dead, for sure!

Every journey has its end. So did Mazhar’s. As soon as he got off, he came after me. I ran too. Then we were laughing and joking – after all, we had made it across. He hugged me in relief and thanked the men who had pulled the ropes. Then we realized that though we had crossed over, the jeep was parked near the

bridge at the other end. Now what were we to do? It was a six-mile trek there and Mazhar laid the blame on me. As his subordinate, I was supposed to remember the jeep. There is a saying that one would pray to be a dog rather than a junior in the army. Mazhar declared that subordinates had fewer brain cells and that he could not walk any more. So I was to go get the jeep and come back to pick him up. I said, "I'm not doing that! We go together or we stay here together. If anyone passes by, we'll ask them to tell the jeep to come and pick us up."

Mazhar replied, "It will be morning by then!" As we sat there arguing, we actually got some rest and felt rejuvenated. So we both walked to the car. After dinner that night, Mazhar said, "We can't speak of this to the OC."

"What should we say instead?"

"We have to consult Naik Rajjak. He will dig out an old report and you will write ours based on that. You're the second lieutenant so it's your job to do it."

I absolutely refused. I said, "That's cheating. I'm not going to be a part of this." After some persuasion, Mazhar let out a laugh and said he was just testing me.

I have no idea what Mazhar told the OC the next day but the latter handed me a report and said "This has happened many times before whenever a new junior officer arrives. You don't need much – just see this report and make yours. You did take a walk, cross the river, see the mountains. Just write about that and I will file it. It's actually of no use. There will never be a Fox One, Fox Two, or Fox Three. Pakistanis will never be able to go to Srinagar."

We were dismissed.

Mazhar took the old report and went out. He would take care of it.

One day, OC Shaheb told me to go to Kel. I would have to take the road along the Neelum River past Nuserrah, Nurocchiri, etc. There was no proper road after that, although the path was wide and mules travelled along there. I could ride one to travel. Another mule would carry our luggage and it would take about twenty days to get there. It might take longer to return. Kel was at the far end of Pakistan, or Muzaffarabad. We had a small unit there and the section commander was a havildar named Farid. With him were several road construction workers. They were known as the militia. Locals were engaged in the work as needed. Goiter was a common ailment in this area, so residents collected iodized salt from here. People aged quickly and died. So this set up was arranged a few years ago and iodized salt dispensed freely to all.

Lack of iodine also led to memory loss and brains didn't function properly. Names of father, grandfathers and sons became the same and people thought, for example, that Naimuddin was a hundred years old when in reality, three Naimuddins had been counted. After this roundabout introduction, OC Shaheb came to his point. Farid had been at his station for twelve years, but since no one was willing to move there, he couldn't leave his post. As a result, no one knew what was happening in that area. So OC Shaheb had decided that he would send me with one havildar, one naik and two sections. Farid would then return with his section. I inquired why two sections would go. I was told, "It's so you can be prepared for a small war." I asked again, "What war?"

The OC replied, “We need to oust Farid. He’s made that area his kingdom and has about three hundred wives. He has forcibly brought beautiful women from the hills and kept them in his harem. He has made a rope bridge there and he charges people two annas for it. He is more or less the king of the hill. So when we sent replacements once or twice, they couldn’t penetrate the area because Farid’s men attacked them. So they were forced to return.This time, you must succeed.”

I readily agreed and set off on a jeep. The troops travelled in one truck. Fifteen miles after Nurocchiri, we had to let the vehicles go. Our contacts from the supply core met us there with mules. They were to accompany us but they wouldn’t let the mules in anyone else’s hands. Mules were a valuable commodity in this area. Each one was worth about two lakh taka, the price of several cars and jeeps together. It wasn’t possible to travel in the mountains by any other means than mules. The mules even carried the cannons. One mule was reserved for me and the rest would walk. We set off after a meal, with me riding a mule. I had never straddled a cow, but had ridden a horse before. Mules are twice as large, tall, and fat as horses. The river was two thousand feet below but from atop the mule, I felt as though it was five thousand feet! The mountains loomed on my other side. The mule walked along the side of the river, in case it happened to scrape against the mountainside. We had barely gone ten to twenty steps when I yelled out, “Get me off of here!” I would walk.

All our luggage was on the mules, but we each carried our own haversacks and rifles. I also had a pistol. About four hours later, once evening began to set in, we set up camp for the night in one of our own posts. We sheltered in the small becks which each had a makeshift bed. I was given one to myself. Each post had 5-7 people, some with a lance naik, some with a naik. Two others accompanied them. Their biggest job was to maintain the roads. Where there might have been a path today, there might be none tomorrow because there was no telling when a mountain would collapse onto it. And the roads were no more than three or feet wide paths.

We ate and went to sleep immediately.

We set off early the next morning. Our men were there at every post ahead of us. The posts had been constructed on the mountainsides, each with a waterfall next to it. And there was, of course, beautiful mountain flowers. It was a piece of heaven on earth, beauty wherever the eye was turned. Even the mountain folk were pretty and the women especially so.

They knew exactly when we would be arriving at each post, so there would be food waiting for us. The Neelum River was incredible in its beauty and depth. The area was also known as the Neelum Valley, although not every place was a valley. Some places had mountains on either side with the Neelum running in between. Some places had valleys on both sides while at others was the Indian border. If there was a war, it wouldn’t be possible to travel this road. We came close to our destination on the twentieth day. When we were within one or two miles, the havildar stated that the troops would stay here. He, a naik, and I would go ahead to Farid’s barracks first.

I was pleased with the idea. I thought we could go meet and discuss with Farid, and have our war later. So the three of us set off. It didn’t take us long. We arrived to see a beautiful gate made of mountain flowers set up by Farid. As soon as we entered, Farid and a couple of his men saluted us. What I saw was a very handsome, tall, and well-built man over six feet tall and about thirty five to forty years old. We shook hands and he even extended his hand to the naik and havildar. Then he said, “Sir, we were very

happy to hear you were coming. But you were supposed to come with two sections, one to escort me back and the other to stay here." I said, "Oh, they're here but since it would get a little crowded, we left them a mile or two behind. Let them be."

Farid said, "That's impossible. We have made arrangements here for everyone and they will all have dinner here. We have even slaughtered a goat."

I asked, "Where do you get your rations?"

He replied, "Rations, that is, dry rations, are delivered to us every month and left two outposts away. My men go and pick them up along with our salaries. We arrange for the rest of our supplies from the mountains. We also get some supplies from the local farmers, of course, after paying for them. There is a small bazaar too though on the other side."

I asked, "How do you get to the other side?"

He said, "There is a rope bridge.

Again, I inquired, "Who made this bridge?"

We were told that he had had it constructed by his own men. The local people had also made some monetary contribution and that was enough. We got to the beck as we talked and found it well arranged.

Men were sent to escort our two sections here and in a congenial atmosphere, we were given warm water to freshen up with. In the late afternoon, I stood in the Neelum Valley, completely taken. I don't know if God has created another such place on earth. I never knew that a place could be so beautiful. The far off mountains stood with their peaks covered in snow. The Indian border wasn't too far away.

We were served a dinner of meat with gravy, dal, and flatbread. After breakfast the following morning, I said to Farid, "Please explain everything to us. Then the havildar will stay here and we will head out tomorrow morning." When an NCO was appointed, I took a walk with him to inspect the area. I also climbed up the mountain a little. I looked around the valley as well but I found no trace of the famed harem of three hundred beauties. Neither did I see a kingdom nor a king. People loved telling tales! I climbed from the mountain and walked towards the left on the road and came upon the rope bridge where a couple of people were now crossing with. This side was a little more settled compared to the other side where I could see quite a bit of empty land. There were some people on the mountain too but I couldn't tell why they were there but there might have been a marketplace. On asking, I learned that in the time of the king, people from Kashmir would come through there and there was no restriction on movement. Even inter-cultural marriages took place then. So, a bazar had flourished but now it was lackluster because Pakistan was on this side and India on the other. No one came over from the other side anymore but sometimes vegetables were sold taken over, so the rope bridge was a necessity.

By the time I came back, it was lunchtime. After lunch, I sat with Farid for a chat. I asked him many questions: where his hometown was, what he did, when did he join the army, why did he not transfer anywhere else in the last twelve years, and so on. His answers were very plain. He was a Pathan and there was some lingering trouble in his tribe. He had sought revenge through murder and then run away to join the Pakistani army. Within three or four years, he had been posted to Muzaffarabad and from there, he was transferred here. He had built this place up but no one had bothered to check in, although he did get

rations, mail, and salt. He also got promoted. He received money to repair the roads and this all came in every other month. He had, in the meantime, been promoted to havildar. Unfortunately, he could not return to his hometown because his enemies were in power. If he returned, he would be killed instantly. So he had not attempted to venture out of here.

Later, I meandered around on my own, taking in the marvel that was the Neelum Valley. I have been taken by surprise only twice in my life: once, here in Neelum; the other, when I stood before the Taj. No matter which way I looked or how far, I could only appreciate why this place was known as Neelum Paradise.

The next day, I headed back with my two sections. Again, after twenty days, we reached the Tokhri Camp in Muzaffarabad. We had walked nearly 50 of the 80 mile road, driving only the rest of the way. Major Shukur could not believe that the whole story about Farid was a fantasy, made up by those who only wanted to avoid being transferred to that region. He had been relying on a lie!

After my operation to Kel, my time went by well in Muzaffarabad. I received letters from home every week. Suddenly, I got a telegram saying that Ma was very ill. The OC agreed to give me leave and asked if I wanted to buy anything for my sisters from Pakistan. The next day, he summoned me and handed over 1500 rupees. I said, "Sir, I have seven or eight hundred rupees with me. I didn't have much to spend on here so I usually send my money home. Even the cigarettes are free here!"

He laughed and said, "Yes, I heard that you have been smoking sometimes."

I protested, "Sir, it's very cold here, so perhaps…"

"Well then, why don't you start drinking too?"

I replied, "No, sir, I don't care for that."

I set off the next day and reported to the headquarters at Murree. I met everyone and then Major Imtiaz had a chat with me.

He said, "I've been keeping up with the news and so has the CO Shaheb. We've heard much praise about you and we've all heard how even the Adjutant General went to visit your company. When you return, the CO will visit your company again."

He proceeded to give me some advice and then said, "There aren't too many books to read in the army. At most, there are 50 or 60 simplistic ones. Don't waste your time while in Muzaffarabad. Read those books and I have bought a diary for you. A black one – where you will write about your army activities, as well as about the TOE and weapons if you wish."

Since it was lunchtime already, we went to the mess. Murree's mess was wonderful – the dining hall was beautiful, as were the bar and sleeping quarters. They had to be since everyone's eye was on this region. People came on vacation here with their children in the summer. The Generals, the Brigadiers all came to relax here. Even weddings were conducted.

I took a bus to Pindi the next morning. It was very cold in Pindi. From here, I went to Lahore where I bought a same-day air ticket to Dhaka. I set off for Jessore on the evening after I landed in Dhaka. The first thing I did on entering my home was to hug my mother. She was sitting on the bed and, surprised, I asked, "Are you ill? You don't seem ill to me at all!"

Abba explained, “Pain in the stomach. She’s on medication now so the pain is less.”

I said, “I’m here for eight days. Won’t Ma be better in this time?”

Just eight days? Everyone was shocked. I said, “I wanted a month’s leave but there weren’t any other officers so they gave me less leave.”

I noticed that Abba had grown old very quickly, but he was happy and smiled as he declared that everything was all right. Our new three-bedroom home had already been constructed but one room had been converted into a dining room. There was a new kitchen, pantry and veranda.

I had a total of ten days’ leave and I stayed home the whole time. Hasan, Rekha, and Moin were growing up. Hasan had passed his matriculation, Moin was still studying and so was Rekha, who was quite active both at school and college. Rekha was very close to our parents and took care of Ma, so she was well-loved. She was also a favorite of mine. Hasan did all the respectable jobs around the house while Moin declared that he wasn’t willing to do anything menial.

My short leave was over too soon. Before heading out, I secretly pressed fifteen hundred taka into Abba’s hand. When I arrived in Dhaka, my head was filled with thoughts of the one of three daughters I had seen in the jeep some time ago. I hadn’t forgotten the house through whose gates the jeep had entered. So, I went there directly. From inside the gate, I saw an L-shaped house, rather large. After a quick inquiry, I climbed a few flights of stairs and pressed the doorbell. Enamul Shaheb opened the door (there seemed to be a lot of people or relatives in the house at the moment). He was quite astonished to see me. He shook my hand and escorted me to the drawing room where I sat towards the right side. Mrs. Enamul Huq appeared a short while later with their youngest son, Ehsanul Huq. This young man and Enamul Shaheb were enough to carry on a conversation and ask questions. Oh, how many questions he had! But it seemed like he was most impressed by my improved build. And then, there she was – tall, slim, knee-length hair in a braid, a blue sari. Going up to her father, she said in English that she had a rehearsal: “The American director, Mr. Rutherford, has come. So I’m going for the rehearsal of *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller.” Someone had come to accompany her. She pretended not to notice me at all, but I felt as though she had looked at me twice or thrice. But she came and left so quickly that Haque Shaheb had no chance to introduce us. After her exit, Haque Shaheb said, “That was my oldest daughter. She’s in medical school. She also plays the piano and sings. A good sportswoman too.” After about five minutes, we returned to our regular conversation. Soon, snacks arrived – cheese on toast. This was the first time I tasted this food and I loved it. I also had a cup of tea and finally, got up to leave. I was hoping he would ask if I had any plans for marriage but he never even hinted at that. How could I then bring up the subject? I left and climbed into Chapabu’s car that I had come in.

One thing I had been noticing in the last few days was that, wherever I went, people appeared very deferential towards me. I was, after all, a lieutenant in the Pakistani army!

At night, I chatted with Bhai Shaheb, and watching a drama on TV with him. After dinner, I went to bed. Rafiq Mama had arrived from London in the meantime – as a Barrister, frequenting the courts. He would come back for lunch as he was still staying here. His home was still under construction. A jolly man, he always had something to say, treating everyone as equals, no matter where they came from or what their circumstances were. The way he laughed and talked with anyone made them feel as though there was no

one so dear to him. I was actually his maternal uncle but as I was younger, I called him Mama, and he reciprocated in the same manner. But he loved me very much (perhaps he still does but has no time to say it). The next morning, Khokon accompanied me to the airport. He had grown into nice young man and had begun to go around on his own. Chapabu actually complained a little about his habits. Khokon liked girls and vice versa. But, according to Chapabu, "This is just a show. He will never find a wife. Mark my words, Shantu, there is no wife in his future. He has no interest in studying but I don't know what he wants to do."

I returned to Lahore and went around a little. I stayed at the army mess and visited both the engineering mess and the "D" hostel. I also met with my manservant, Goni. The next day, I took a bus to Pindi and then straight to Murree. After a two-day stay at Murree, I went back to Tokhri Camp in the car Mazhar had sent. Mazhar was waiting anxiously and embraced me as soon as I arrived. "Have you heard the news?"

"What?"

He said, "You already knew that Maksud Shaheb passed the staff college exam, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's leaving. And there is a send-off party for him tonight. He has spent the last seven days doing nothing but preparing his speech. Now he's pacing on the veranda and practicing his speech, aloud. You will not disturb him. Tonight is his night."

That night, the party went as planned. Quite a number of officers came in from other areas, but it was the same menu of alcohol and pakoras. Before the food was served, though, Shukur Shaheb declared he has something to say about Maksud Shaheb. At the end of his speech, Shukur Shaheb said, "Come, everyone, dinner has been served." Maksud Shaheb was stunned. But what about his speech? Well, there was no opportunity! We had a good laugh about this later.

Maksud Shaheb left.

We were informed that there would be a brigade exercise, advance to contact – that meant we were to advance to meet the enemy, although there was no enemy here. Here, we would have to climb the Pir Chinasi. Ten thousand feet. We headed off on the appointed day. It was extremely cold. Shukur Shaheb was suddenly assigned some duty, so he took leave of the Brigade Commander and went off to Pindi. So Mazhar took the company's lead. Everyone had been told when their camp was to leave. Climbing Pir Chinasi was one of the world's most difficult tasks. About 8-10 miles in, there was a bridge. From there, if one advanced a little further along the side of the mountain, there was a river. Mazhar led our company up the mountain at 9 am. We had mules which carried our luggage while we carried our rifles and pistols. Apparently, climbing the mountain was the equivalent of advance to contact. If we could climb up, we wouldn't have to do anything else. I didn't think it was anything impossible. I used to walk and climb, so I went upwards easily enough, but it was towards the finish line that I began to feel the lack of oxygen in the air and it was getting more difficult to keep going. I noticed that Mazhar wasn't bothered by it despite his 220-pound weight. Regardless, we all managed to climb up without any incident and one thing that became very clear from this was that our company was quite fit.

We ate our haversack lunch when we got hungry and had to drink a lot of water there. We had a guide who made short work of telling us where to rest. The officers' bunks were quite large where huge logs burned to warm up the rooms. Suddenly, from one of the other bunkers we heard a scream. A couple of guards and we ran to see what was going on. Mazhar Shaheb was screaming from inside a sleeping bag and trying to roll over. He had got stuck inside the bag, which rather surprised as I couldn't imagine how such a thing could happen.

I don't know how but Aahaladita had arrived there before us but I knew he had not come on a plane. It was he who ran to the bag and thrust his hand through to tear the bag apart. Instantly, a huge snake rolled out. It had been curled around Mazhar. With the bag torn, the snake slowly glided out of the door.

Mazhar continued to scream. He was sure this was Maksud's doing. Maksud must have planned this and set Aahaladita to execute. I, however, found no grounds for such reasoning. We cooled Mazhar down but all I could think about was how strong a man's heart must be to climb a 10,000-foot mountain and then fight with a huge snake! His bed was thoroughly checked and readied. The news, however, got as far as Brigadier Nasrullah, who was a neat, slim man. He had no trouble climbing up to our location. On arrival, he sat with all the officers in the dining tent. A fire had been lit on a walnut tree trunk which would continue to burn for up to a month. Nasrullah Shaheb checked to see that everyone was present. He was happy and congratulated us. Later at night, when we were ordered to check on our troops, Mazhar and I went to check on each person in our company. We spent about an hour with the troops. By then, the mules had lugged all our equipment to the top. We went to our bunks to sleep. Aahaladita did not come around anymore. We stayed there the next day too.

It was white all around. No end in sight. We had been told not to look directly at the white mountains and not to get any snow on our feet. Sleep was allowed only for 4-5 hours because we might go to sleep forever for lack of oxygen, although that didn't happen too often at 10,000 feet. Regardless, it would be uncomfortable. The day went by in chatting. The next day's schedule included climbing down the mountain and going back to our own camps. This was the end of the exercise. We had climbed up on the north side but now we'd have to climb down the southern side. Each company was assigned a schedule so that no one tumbled on to the other while climbing down. About three thousand feet below, there was no snow but that was where the rocky mountains began. We didn't know about this new torment and climbing down was torture. I don't think I have ever suffered as much. I don't know how many times I fell or how many times I rolled down. Finally, it ended – like some kind of exercise. But I felt as though my left knee couldn't bear my weight anymore and it had swollen up as well. One good thing was that because the camp was far away, transport had been arranged. The other units, though, had no vehicle. We returned in comfort.

This was followed by another exercise. It was another recce for which we would need to climb 20-30 feet to the right of the road to Srinagar. There was a proper paved road there which, however, ended at one point. Our task was to figure out how to extend the road further.

We were about to head out in the car to complete the road recce exercise when we were told the car had a problem. Repairs were underway. Lunch time came around and we ate. Then we learned that our transport was fixed and we were to be accompanied by Commander Sadek who was actually a havildar with the Special Service group. They were known as commandos. The driver and I took our dinner with us. There

was a good post at our destination and we would have no worries once we reached, but we had to get there by tonight. We drove along and soon had to take a right turn onto a road that curved this way and that. Then we began to climb. Most of the time we had to drive in the second gear but we were almost at the end of the paved road when the car made a strange knocking sound and stopped. We all got down and the driver tried hard to fix it but to no avail. Evening was approaching, so Havildar Sadek said, “Sir, please have your dinner because it will be dark soon. After dinner, we tried to fix the car again but with no luck. The havildar said he would have to go back down and return with a mechanic. There was no alternative. I asked, “How will you go?” He said, “I’ll trek down and keep walking. If I can hitch a ride, I’ll go to Muzaffarabad and return with a mechanic tomorrow.”

Sadek had been here many times before. As it was getting dark, he said, “Sir, there is a bit of a problem here.” I asked, “What problem?” He said, “Sir, even though the car is in neutral gear, we can’t rely on it. It might roll down the mountain, so I’ll place rocks behind the wheels.” I understood. He relayed a strange plan for staying the night here. I would lie along the two front seats and the driver would lie in the back. The havildar would shroud us in blankets, so that if any bear happened by, it would assume that a couple of other bears lay there. All I could think was, “Rubbish!”

I said, “That’s not possible. We’ll take care of it. You don’t have to worry. You should rather be on your way and be aware for yourself. A bear could attack you too.

He replied, “Sir, bears rule the area a little distance from where you stand because there isn’t too much snow here. And even if there is, it slides down so the bears can roam freely. Besides, this area isn’t populated. There’s no fear of bears in the direction where I’m headed.”

He left, telling us he’d be back the next morning. We stood outside the car after he was gone, then decided to take a walk around. As I walked around to the other side, it seemed as though the sky, with its moon and stars, had dropped down below me. The driver was standing next to me. I asked him, “Do you know if there are people where those little lights are shining?” He replied, “Yes, a few, sir. I heard that they had come over two thousand years ago with Alexander and many of them had stayed behind along the way when he left. One of those groups settled here. Many years ago, an earthquake caused the river to form a loop here and then it flowed through. These people have been stuck here since.”

I asked again, “What do they do there? What do they eat? How do they survive? What do they even do for a living?”

The driver explained, “Sir, you don’t have to ask so many questions. Many people ask me the same things and I give them the same answer. These people rear sheep and make their clothes from the wool. They also farm. They eat the sheep for food. It has been a thousand or two years since anyone went to them. They haven’t met anyone either. But you shouldn’t be too upset about that because they live in great peace and happiness. There are plenty of bees there from which they get lots of honey and wax. They use the wax for light and use wood for fire. Sir, they’re happy, as are most people where they are, no matter where in the world. So, don’t waste your time thinking of them. Those who do, usually have some ulterior motive in mind.”

I learned a life lesson right there. Still, I believed that I could definitely think about them without any ill intention.

People can easily make up different types of stories, especially mountainfolk. Maybe the driver had spoken the truth. Perhaps it was only half-true. Who knew? I looked around and saw only dark hills. The river was far away. After a few more minutes, we both got back into the car. It didn't matter whether bears came or not, but the cold certainly did. We didn't change clothes and in fact, had to wrap ourselves in two extra blankets each. I don't remember when we slept or awoke.

Sadek arrived with the dawn, a car and a mechanic in tow. One had only to meet Sadek to realize how efficient a person could be. A small, but very strong commando, Sadek saluted me and said, "Sir, let me drop you off to our post in the other car."

Our men were at the post, including the naik. From the work I could see, it was obvious that there had been progress. The beke was made of solid wood – a tree trunk on top of which was soil and underneath, rocks. Everyone slept in one room and kept warm by the lighted tree trunk. There was a balcony on one side of the room where they cooked. I asked, "Do bears come here?" They said, "Sir, they don't come up to this point, but they do come close to where you left. There are bears too ahead of here but only sometimes at night, they come here as well."

So Sadek was right!

I checked the books and the master roll. Sadek told me he was going to the car and, if I wished, I could ask the naik to show me the road under construction. Our next check post was almost six miles away and that is where the road would end. The car took a right turn at one point and instantly the scene became white – for as far as the eye could see – perhaps a hundred miles. What an incomparable sight! The naik said, "Those mountains are very tall and large. Their peaks are nearly always covered in snow." I asked, "Is that Pakistan or India?" He replied, "Both."

We alighted from the car and walked to the post. After a quick brief about our work, accompanied by the rest of the company, we took a six-mile trek to another post to complete the recce. There we inspected the road and progress of the work. The road narrowed at this point and the mountains were closer. We had lunch here and the naik said, "Sir, if a guest arrives suddenly in the mountain areas of Kashmir, they're treated with mountain chickens. In the olden days, chickens and eggs were reserved for the king's people who would come to collect them from here two or three times a year. Now they're self-sufficient and can even sell chickens and eggs themselves."

After the recce, we understood that it was possible to someday construct a road here. We closely inspected the rocks and pebbles, and found granite in some areas and basalt phosphorus in others. We returned to the post as it would be dark soon. Sadek had arrived with our ride. We spent the night there and returned in the morning. As soon as we arrived, I learned that the CO Shaheb was coming.

Two days later, I got a letter informing me that I was now posted to Murree, where I would join as the Adjutant at the battalion headquarters. Major Shukur Shaheb invited me for dinner at his home, along with a few others. He said, "You're now an Adjutant. You will now sit close to the CO Shaheb's office. You will have great influence and affluence. Please remember to summon us sometimes, especially for conferences."

The next day, I took leave of Mazhar and set off. At Murree, however, I let it be known that I would arrive in three days. On the way, I stopped over to see Akbar in Mirpur. He had also been promoted to Lieutenant.

He was very happy at my unexpected arrival and took the trouble of showing around up to the border in his car. He was posted at the border where there was a lot of plain land. He forced me to stay the night.

The next day, I set off for Murree, and went directly to the headquarters. The CO Shaheb received me happily. Imtiaz Azim was happy too. Ashraf Shaheb was the Superintendent Officer, soon to be 2IC. It was obvious that he wasn't easy to please, but he was never too displeased either. Imtiaz Azim, who was the SO2P (Staff Officer to Planning), said, "You can start work from tomorrow." He may have been the Staff Officer but he took care of everything, a task army officers could do if they wished or vice versa. The 2IC was Mazhar Shaheb. Ashraf Shaheb left although Imtiaz Azim had asked him to stay for a meal. He left at mealtime as did the CO. So Imtiaz Azim accompanied me to the mess where we ate. Then he took me to Bell House, a renowned mess in Murree. It was a rather large place where not only engineers but other officers as well stayed. There was even a Brigadier whose name Jimmy, a bachelor. I never got to know his full name. He stayed in one of the larger quarters, which also had a sitting room, with his dog. I was also given a good room.

My life at Murree thus began and my first night went well. There had been snow the last couple of days but there seemed to be a bit of a wind that night. I awoke early to shave and shower, then put on a new set of clothes. I was now an Adjutant – I was feeling quite happy with myself. At breakfast, I met Brigadier Jimmy to whom I introduced myself. He didn't speak much – after all, he was a Brigadier! He didn't seem to be from West Pakistan. Perhaps an Anglo. I left the dining hall and picked up the small baton that army officers carry as I had to walk quite a distance towards the center of Murree. But before reaching the center, a road turns upwards to the right where all the headquarters are situated. I had almost reached the headquarters when I stepped on a glassy sheet of ice and head first. My cap stayed in place but I rolled down as far as I had climbed up. When I stopped, I got up and straightened my clothes. I wasn't hurt. Rather I felt as though I'd been skiing although no one ever skis on their chests! I felt foolish. After some consideration, I decided to trek up again, this time by following the path with snow on it. This time, it was much easier as long as I was careful not to step on any black ice. I looked around and saw an RP, an MP, and a few guards who must have seen what happened.

As soon as I entered the battalion headquarters, I was struck by two things: one, the warmth; and two, the applause. The clappers included the CO, 2IC (the older people) and Imtiaz (the younger). A surprised me looked at the clock on the wall and saw that I was ten minutes late. Embarrassed, I saluted and apologized: "Sorry for being late." Imtiaz Azim responded, "Did you go skiing?" and I realized that nothing went unnoticed for a minute in this place. They all began to laugh and I joined in. They said, "This is an old tradition – whenever a new officer arrives in the winter, we don't tell him how to climb up. And, inevitably, they all slip and fall, so don't feel too bad." I was asked to sit after an extra chair was added to the two already there. Tea was ordered but I was hesitant to sit. CO Shaheb reassured me, "Sit. We're like a family here. We all work together even though we may be at great distances from each other. Each company in a different place. Azad Kashmir isn't a small area but it's all mountains with some roads and two rivers. You'll figure it out eventually. But today, let's have tea and a chat."

I was asked about my engineering life in Lahore, life as a PM and at Tokhri Camp. I answered briefly. The tea arrived. This was a cold region, wintery, snowy. Tea was frequently drunk. After tea, we each went to our quarters. I saw the CO Shaheb go down a couple of feet to his room. In this hilly area, no building was level. Major Shaheb and Imtiaz climbed up a couple of steps to their sleeping quarters.

I began work. The peon showed me the in-tray and the out-tray. The in-tray first comes to the Adjutant. I had to put the small seal and my initials on the documents, then pass it on to the 2IC or the SO2P. Then on to the CO Shaheb, who replied to the letters and returned them to the Adjutant and Head Clerk to be sent on.

I summoned the Head Clerk and learned that everything was sent in one lot. The letters had to be opened by noon and prepared to be sent to the 2IC or SO2P by one and they returned from the CO Shaheb by one-forty-five. After I perused them, they were sent to the Head Clerk. One thing that surprised me in the first few days was that the CO himself responded to most of the letters himself. All I had to do was place the reference numbers, a date or a seal on a few. So letters were ready in no time, although any letter going outside the battalion could be signed by the CO only. Within a few days, I figured out that mine was just a clerical job, completely the opposite of what I had previously done in field work.

My first day went well. Imtiaz Azim asked me to go over to his mess in the evening. That was at the Divisional Headquarters – large, and located on that same mountain. There was a tennis court below with a squash court next to it. After lunch at my mess, the Bell House, I rested for a bit, then, putting on my gym clothes, I took my racquet and went to the tennis court. It was quite sunny, so the snow had been cleaned and a game was in progress. Many came to play there, including a doctor. I signed up, and included my battalion name. There was a coach who kept a record of all the information. There was a monthly fee and he helped the newbies. If there were not enough players, he would play himself and teach. I got a chance to play with Mr. Marker who, after one game, declared clearly, "A very novice player!"

I played this game till my very last day at Murree. I also played squash. Many went horse-riding, but I never learned how although I did experience a ride. During the summer, football was played by the units that were stationed close by. Sometimes, tournaments were arranged. A few days later, I learned that there was also a golf course to which Imtiaz Azim took me one day. Before taking me, though, he asked if I had ever played golf before. In response, I had said that I had only heard the word "golf" and that I had never seen a golf course. He reassured me, saying "You may need to see it sometimes now or hear about it. You may even be in charge of its maintenance. But this game is usually played in the summer." He also said, "Many illustrious people come to play here and may spend a day or two, especially in the summer. One of those people is Ayub Khan."

There were trained people on the golf course as well as some local people who had been in the same profession for years, even from the time of the British. At that time, only the British would play.

In the evening, I went to Imtiaz Azim's mess to find him standing at attention in a suit, pants, and tie. This man was over six feet tall, with large eyes and a handsome face. All his five brothers were in the army too, from captain to a general. He himself was a Major. And among the others, there was one Brigadier General, and two others were Generals.

A little later, the others began to arrive, one by one. There was no limit to the amount each could drink. Except for one or two, everyone was at the bar before dinner. Though I sat with them, I hadn't touched any alcohol. I ate the nuts and drank the water provided. That was good enough for me. And in between, Azim and I chatted. The chat was of three kinds: about the army, where, of course, our battalion joined in; sometimes, it was about East Pakistan. He was very interested in East Pakistan and wanted to know what atrocities had occurred there. I didn't say much, being careful with my responses. The rest, Azim

knew, and in fact, informed me about. He hailed from Jhelum in Punjab, but his attitude was like this. A few days later, I learned that his third interest was women. He was an unmarried man of 36 or 37 and would become a Lieutenant Colonel any day now.

When it was time for dinner, he insisted that I stay and eat with him. My dinner at Bell House went to waste. I returned to Bell House late at night to find my batman waiting. He helped me undress and I felt bad. I should have given the boy leave before going over there. I said, "Sorry, I should have told you to leave." He replied in Urdu, "Not a problem, sir."

I began to grow acquainted with everyone gradually. One day, Kamal Laskar Shaheb appeared. He was now a Captain at EME and had been posted to the Adjutant EME Battalion. We were both happy about that. He didn't know that I was staying at Bell House and had been posted at 5th Engineering Battalion as Adjutant. I had no idea he was coming here either. His room was readied, a little distance behind mine, but it was a good room with a fireplace and carpet.

It was time for the first party at the Divisional Headquarter mess. We all gathered together, a substantial group, and the party went very well – as though everyone grew friendlier after coming in from the extreme cold outside and warming themselves at the roaring fire in the fireplace. Everyone mingled as equals, asking about each other's health. There was no discrimination among the brigadiers, colonels, majors, captains, or lieutenants. At one point, my CO introduced me to the GOC, who was a Pathan but was wholly English. He had a British accent. After a question or two, he said that he had lived in East Pakistan. I said, "Sir, you were the chairman of the board of my ISSB."

"That was back in 1960!" he exclaimed.

I said "I am indeed talking about that year."

He was curious to know what I had been up to since then. I said, "Sir, I was studying engineering. Then I came to the core of engineering."

He was happy to hear about me. The ADC was his son-in-law. He was also a Pathan, very handsome. His wife was equally good-looking. I had a chat with them, then we had dinner. The GOC gave an after-dinner speech, then we were dismissed. It was all over by ten pm. I returned to Bell House.

Thus began the life of the triad: Imtiaz Azim, Kamal Laskar and me. We did everything together more or less. If not, at least Imtiaz and I would take walks in the cold evenings along the streets of Murree, which became quite enchanting in the winter, a natural wonder. It was white as far as the eye could see, with snow-capped mountains all around. The trees were barren on the mountain sides, covered only in snow. This scene was incredible especially on a moonlit night.

There is a famous restaurant called SAM in Murree that was open late. Many people who came to see the snow stayed the whole day and had breakfast tea, lunch, and afternoon snacks at SAM. And on Saturday nights, there was dancing. Many officers, naturally, came in on those nights with their wives. Bachelors came too and the atmosphere would be quite festive.

There was one main road in Murree – Mall Road. It was quite long. At one end was Pindi Point, and on the other, Kashmir Point. We took many walks from one point to the other and back. From Pindi Point,

we could see Pindi and from Kashmir Point, Kashmir was visible – the Indian Kashmir. It is not possible to see India from Murree, and if anyone does, then it is a mistake.

Winter passed in walking through snow and warming up by the fireplace. Or by playing squash or tennis and working in the office. Once a month, I had to be the Duty Officer, and on that day, I would have to be at the Divisional Headquarter. I would also have to maintain the phone calls, messages, or any other work that may come along. So, I would have to stay the night here. When I was on duty here, Kamal Shaheb took my place, and vice versa. In the meantime, one Sunday, Imtiaz Azim left for Pindi or somewhere.

Mazhar Shaheb lived there with his family as did the CO. What was surprising, though, was that no one ever invited us over for dinner at their home. If they invited, it was to Shams, or to the mess, or to the club. Suddenly, one day, to my surprise, a letter arrived from the GOC, inviting me to his home for dinner. The time: 7 pm. Putting on my suit and tie from Janjua Tailors, I arrived exactly on the dot at the GOC's home. GOC Shaheb answered the door himself and led me in by the hand. I was taken aback! I thought first an orderly would open the door, then the ADC would appear, and then the GOC would meet me. But that wasn't the case at all. On top of that, I realized I was the only guest. I greeted him and as he replied, he closed the door and, as he led me inside to be seated, he apologized, "I made a big mistake! I should have sent the car for you."

I reassured him, "Sir, walking is good for health." He laughed. Then, as he went upstairs, I followed. His wife arrived – quite a large, Pathan woman, who must have been pretty in her time. The GOC introduced us and she spoke to me in clear English. I was under the impression that Pathan women didn't know much English. Finally, the ADC came in with his wife – that is, the GOC's daughter. The conversation went on for a while, dominated by the GOC and his wife. I learned that they had loved living in East Pakistan. The daughter used to attend Holy Cross College and she had left many friends there. Most of the talk, thus, was social or family-related. When they asked about me, I answered. The soup arrived and I served myself. We had the soup where we sat. The GOC said, "It will be easier to serve dinner this way. After dinner, we'll have tea."

We sat down to dinner by eight and were done by eight-thirty. Then a cup of tea. At nine, he said, "Now we can bid each other good night." I got up and after shaking my hand, this time he left. The ADC saw me outside and into a car. I thanked him and left. Who could believe that people like these would one day be involved in '71?

And yet, it is plausible. One day, I was playing tennis when, suddenly from the gallery, a young child cursed at me in Urdu, "Bangal!" A West Pakistani doctor was playing with me. He was taken aback. He turned out and said, "Get lost!" The child ran off and the colonel said, "Please don't take it personally. Many parents in our country give their children these kinds of incorrect information."

Without another word, I finished our game, then said, "Sir, I'm leaving now." He knew from the coldness in my voice that I was still perturbed but he did not pursue it. I believe that these people were nursing their hatred towards us. Ayub Khan's regime had put a temporary stop on it but now Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was rising in East Pakistan and it was time for the Bangalis to rise. The Bangalis were clamoring for their rights. The West Pakistanis, especially the Punjabs, could not appreciate this, and the fire of their hatred and anger grew. Oil had been poured into the fire and now it was blazing. This raged like a forest-fire, even in the homes of people.

We stretched our limits and began to venture further. Winter was waning and the warm weather was on its way. Some cars and visitors were starting to arrive. There were rest houses and guesthouses. Some even had holiday homes here. So quite a number of people came to visit, stayed a few days, made sure everything was okay, and then left. When summer arrived and the children were let off school, they would return with their families to spend the vacation. Usually, it was the wives, sons and daughters who stayed, with the husbands or fathers coming occasionally. Two nurses, Jamila and Sayeeda, who worked at the Murree CMH, had become quite well-known. In addition to their professional skills, they were famous for their ability to attract officers. It was rumored that several officers were involved with them. Usually, the officers who were posted to Murree were chosen because of their superior quality, so it wasn't appropriate for them to show such nurse-love. Even Imtiaz Azim had a couple of girlfriends show up every Sunday and he would drive up higher up on the mountain where there were many categories of guesthouses. They enjoyed the beauty of the view and ate different types of delicious foods. Sometimes, they would send me away and go off to spend the night. I was used as a cover up so no one would know for sure who was involved with the girls. I never understood the logic behind this.

As soon as the warm weather arrived, so did our friends: Khaled, Mosharraf, Sabi, and many others. One day, Lt. Zaman from our Engineering University arrived. He was Kamal's guest so he stayed with him. Before going to bed, Lt. Kamal asked, "Hey Zaman, what do you want for breakfast?" Zaman replied, "What do you have?" Kamal said, "Bread any way you want, same with eggs, then liver fry, roast chicken, jam, jelly, butter and many other things." A surprised Zaman said, "Yes, that will do."

I went to work in the morning. When I returned in the afternoon, I saw Zaman chasing after Kamal with a sandal in his hand. He wanted to beat him up because Zaman woke up late, showered and asked for breakfast. The bearer brought him a glass of cold buffalo's milk with a slice of cold, burnt toast. This was enough to incite a man to violence!

Street parties were held in Murree in the summer. And in the winter, people got warm by the fireplace and with booze.

New officers posted to Murree had to learn some stories before the arrival of summer because they would have to tell these stories as guides to the female visitors to the area. They were strange stories. Some story about an English girl who fell in love with a Pathan boy, and then one day, how they jumped to their deaths from the culvert on this road, obviously because the British parents didn't want their daughter marrying a local boy. Then there was the story of an English captain who fell for a local girl, the outcome of which was not happy. The two of them had hung themselves to death from the same rope. Many had seen them hanging together and apparently they could still be seen at night. There were also other stories about horses and elephants. There were many elephants and horses on some mountain and they could cross from one mountain to another in one jump. In the beginning, I was skeptical but these stories had been in circulation for a long time. During the summer, many generals and brigadiers came to vacation here with their families. It fell to the new junior officers to show the family members around Murree and these stories became necessary then to entertain the visitors.

Those who came to visit for a day or two always made it a point to visit two places: Pindi Point and Kashmir Point. Besides, they liked to walk around and enjoy the beauty of the city. That is also why different stories were created about each spot. When stories were told on one balcony, the people in the

adjoining balcony were drawn in. When they heard the tale of the two lovers who had committed suicide together, they felt a strange sense of satisfaction in peering down that dark cave in the mountain where the incident occurred. So, in a way, the stories worked out well for all: the visitors stayed entertained and young officers like us passed the time. The stories, by the way, were quite drawn out, sort of like the tales from the Arabian Nights because, obviously, we had to walk from one point to the other and back. Walking along Murree's Mall Road in the evenings became a habit. We couldn't do without it, and at that hour, the road would become very crowded with others like us. Groups would be held up by another in front, but still, we had to come to Murree and take that walk. And then everyone would leave. The senior officers who came would remain mostly at the Divisional Headquarters mess or club. Their rooms, however, were booked from at least six months prior to their arrival. One day, we saw the two daughters of Ayub Khan drive past in the President House car. When Imtiaz Azim pointed it out, I noticed that the car had no license plate. If Ayub Khan or any member of his family visited, they would stay at the President House in Pindi Point.

A new building was constructed next to Bell House. It was named East Pakistan House. Anyone could stay there, but especially if they were from East Pakistan. It was a beautiful house with a flower garden and good food. I visited a couple of times.

As soon as summer came, one evening, I saw that a car filled with young children arrived at a school. Parents, who accompanied them, left later in the evening and this caused a hue and cry among the children, all at once. What agony in those cries! The building shook with their cries as the senior students tried to pacify them. I felt emotional at the sight. How could these little children stay at the nunnery separated from their parents (although the nunnery was a high school)? I wondered what the future held for these children – without parents, without a society. Perhaps they would learn to speak English well, read a few English books, what more would they get out of it? What would their future turn out to be? Regardless, a couple of days later, they all settled down.

I realized that I wasn't the only one who was affected by the sight of the children. Later, I learned that there were several other such schools. Each front had a different type of such school. Once a week, they marched past on Mall Road. The younger ones could not go too far but it was compulsory for the older children. It was pleasing to see the children. They reminded me of my younger sister, Hasnu whom I used to bathe, feed, dress, and take to school when she was little.

Everyone had become more self-sufficient and would now go here and there. In addition, it was summer and there was no more snow. The sun was out but it rained – sudden, unpredictable rain. Still, no one really bothered to walk out with umbrellas. There were many shops and people along Mall Road but it was so crowded that there was no place to stand. And yet, when the rain started, everyone disappeared. Who knows how they vanished so quickly!

One day, I went to MP-Military Police Mess. This was the first time I saw a Military Police mess. There were officers and even a major. During a conversation, I discovered that the older brother of the major was my friend Wajed. I also heard that they had an older brother, Majed, who was also in the army. Majed later died in a plane explosion with Pakistan's military president, General Zia-ul Haq. I also met a very handsome officer named Akbar and learned that he had been the Adjutant at the Engineering Battalion. He was now taking a course at Risalpur. He had come to the Corps of Engineers from a commission from

Sandhurst. His brother-in-law, Yazdani, was also at the Corps of Engineers. I also met a number of other officers.

I returned to the mess for lunch. The battalion officers, especially those ranking below the CO, were eager to set up young officers like myself for marriage. I was incited to meet several girls in this way: Pinewood's daughter, the daughter of Justice Shaheb, of Major Shaheb, etc. I made different excuses to extricate myself. In the meantime, I applied for and got leave for a month this year.

I arrived in Dhaka via Lahore and travelled to Jessore on the same day. Mejho Bhai was newly married and I met the bride. This wedding had taken place hurriedly. I heard that some relative of the girl's had shown her to Mejho Bhai in the dim light of a lantern and then the marriage formalities were quickly completed. Bhabi was from Comilla and had a BA degree. I was not too happy as Boro Bhai had married at 24, Mejho Bhai at 25. It was difficult for Abba to take care of the household and I had to be responsible for providing for Hasnu, Hasan, Moin and Rekha and their education.

I remained in Jessore during my leave. My Shejo Chacha and Chachi came to visit as did Chchoto Chacha, although they didn't actually come because of me. Chchoto Chacha would often visit suddenly like this. He would ride the seven miles from Deyapara on his bicycle, have lunch and return the same way in the evening. He used to call himself the rice mill. He was, however, very alert about Abba, Mejho Chacha and Shejo Chacha saying anything about the land they owned because he had had everything transferred in his name. He had also accumulated a lot of land on his own. He would have others farm the land for him but he never gave away even a few grains of rice. Chchoto Chacha had two sons. His older son could not talk or move around properly. Yet, he went around all day, carried around in his mother's arms. In the afternoon, he went to the marketplace and smoked bidis. The younger son was not very educated – he stayed home and did the chores. Chchoto Chacha did not quite like this. He had a number of daughters, all pretty and married well.

Those who used to study with me at the UP Maktab[46] had begun their life's struggles – some had become peons, some security guards, some were small traders, some police, others were working at the Registry Office or as touts at court or clerks. Some had become beggars. Kanakethe had become one and now sat begging in one of the poshest areas in Doratana. I met everyone. I also met Paru Bhai, Kadam Bhai, Hajera Bhai, Abu Bhai, and others. I greeted the Bihari Jabbar.

During the time of martial law, my friend Hamidar Rahman's younger brother Khokon had been embroiled in a scandal and fled to London. He had now returned and was doing well. Khokon never did a day's work in his life but he managed to somehow live well. In his last years, he drank uncontrollably. Abba once asked Hasan, "Will Khokon never see the error of his ways?" to which Hasan, very calmly replied, "He used to drink only at night before, but now he drinks during the day too." Khokon's wife, Shiuli, was the daughter of Aziz Miah from our village. Khokon is gone now. Shiuli is still living as are his children, although one of his sons died.

I also visited my friend Kamal's home to meet his mother and brother. Kamal has been my lifelong friend and I have always wanted what's best for him. But for him, the friendship depended on his needs – he was there if he needed something, otherwise, there was no sign.

[46] Muslim elementary school

Towards the end of my leave, I came to Dhaka. I had reserved a couple of days for this. I had only one intention – to visit Dhanmondi, at Road 13/4 (that is now Road 2/A). I met with ARM Enamul Huq Shaheb and his wife, Nazera Begum. Neither Taheerah nor Ameerah came out, and whenever I visited, Ameenah always had something to do – some program or stage event to attend. Perhaps that is why I never really got to meet her. Still, I sat there and chatted, although it was usually ARM Enamul Huq Shaheb who did most of the talking and asked innumerable questions. I simply answered, ate the tea and snacks, and departed when it got dark.

I returned to Murree. A few days later, Mejho Bhai and Johur came to visit for a couple of days. I took them to see Mall Road, Pindi Point, Kashmir Point, and to the club in the evening. I had some work, so I had to leave them there. Before leaving, I called the waiter and told him, "These two are my brothers. Please serve them whatever they need. I will come back for them by ten."

As soon as I left, though, I had a feeling that they would cause some ruckus. I was afraid that they might create some big trouble. From my anxiety came fear, and I was proved right. I found myself in a sorry plight as we returned at night. For one thing, it was a mountainous road, then there was the deep chasm on one side and the mountain on the other. Johur had almost passed out and we somehow managed to get him to the Bell House mess. Mejho Bhai said nothing but he balled up his hand to indicate how much Johur had drunk and how many snacks and kababs he had devoured. I thrust them into one room where two beds had already been prepared and told them to go to bed. I instructed my batman to look after them. They would have no dinner. I then went to bed. In the morning, I discovered that Johur had thrown up so much that the vomit had trickled outside. Disgusting! I don't want to write anything more about this. I brought Johur and Mejho Bhai to my room in the morning where there were also two beds. Then, after getting them cleaned up, especially Johur, I asked them to lie down. They could ask for breakfast later if they wanted to. They would get bread and tea. I said, "I'm leaving for work now. I'll be back by lunch. Today is Monday."

When I got back, I found the two of them all ready and waiting. I asked, "What's up?" They said they were too embarrassed to stay a moment longer at the officers' mess because of their behavior the previous night. And true to their word, the two of them left for Pindi.

I was doing well for myself. The CO, 2IC, and Imtiaz Azim were all happy with my performance. So was everyone at the mess, the tennis, and squash divisions. In short, no one was unhappy. I had become involved in many things like the club, the mess, the golf course. One day, we were told that Ayub Khan would visit and meet the officers. He would give a speech and have lunch. We began to decorate and prepare for his arrival in great detail including where his car would stop, who would open the door for him, etc. and continued our practice for several days.

During his speech, Ayub Khan made some excuses about the war of '65. He also spoke of the improvements he had made. He said that if Jamaat had been banned in '64, the important political leaders would have been upset and the country would have been destroyed. He then made a list of all the good things he had done for the army. After lunch, he left. I realized he was on his way to Pindi Point, President House, as his car veered right instead of left on his way out. This President guy came from a village in Rehana, which could very well be called either Pathan Village or Punjabi Village, though there were more Pathans than Punjabis. Even though he was the son of a subedar of the British, he went on to Sandhurst

and did very well. His performance in the army too was praiseworthy. He was the GOC of East Pakistan where he did well for himself but not for anyone else. He had returned to West Pakistan laded with the hatred of the people.

He had, at times, been embarrassed now and then during his career but he had managed to wiggle himself out of the situations and one day, imposed martial law. He would see the end of Pakistan – although Jinnah Shaheb had already paved the way when he declared that Urdu would be the only state language of Pakistan, and remaining silent about it afterwards. The rest were no different. There were some among us too who were not far behind. The proposal that Urdu would Pakistan's state language was placed at the Constituent Assembly by a true Bangali. His descendants still speak Urdu at home and Bihari Bangla in public.

Imtiaz Azim resumed his efforts to get me married. Finally, he asked me, "Do you have anyone waiting in East Pakistan?" After much persuasion, I said, "Yes" and in response to his questioning, I said, "She is studying in medical school. Tall, slim, and pretty. She sings too and plays the piano. She's also a great sportswoman and works with theater. Her name is Ameenah."

As soon as I finished, he asked, "Have you spoken to the girl?"

"No."

"Have you sent a proposal?"

"No."

"Then how do you know you will get married to her?"

"I have left my picture there and visit them every year."

Imtiaz Azim exclaimed, "Stupid! Don't you know that girls get married suddenly, sometimes without notice? Go quickly and give your proposal. Book her!"

I liked what he said, but I couldn't go now as I wouldn't get leave.

Brigadier Jimmy from our mess had gone on leave and left his dog. He had left that dog in my care. I was sitting down one day when the dog came and began to play with my fingers. An artillery officer came in and took a photo of us. The next day, he presented me with a copy and when I asked for another, he said he wold give one to me later. The very next day I put the photo in an envelope and mailed it. The envelope was addressed to ARM Enamul Huq, House No. 165, Dhanmondi R/A, Road No. 13/4, Dhanmondi, Dhaka, East Pakistan. I secretly hoped that Ameenah would see the picture and be duly impressed.

Chapter Five

Further Study at the Young Engineers Officers Course

Towards the end of 1967, the notice for my course arrived. I was to go to Risalpur and join the YEO or Young Engineers Officers Course Five. I would have to leave the heavenly Murree. Everyone said, "Murree and Risalpur are so different. It will be good for you to experience that. It won't be too bad since the summer is almost over because Risalpur is extremely hot in the summer and just as cold in the winter."

A couple of small parties were held before I had to take leave of my 5th Engineers Battalion and go to Risalpur. I would have to go through Pindi, then on to another famous city called Nowshera which lay enroute to Peshawar. There I would have to cross the Kabul River on a boat bridge. Once I crossed over, the road led straight to Risalpur. Then would be Mardan and Swat. I stayed the night at the Engineering Mess in Pindi on the way, where I met Major Nuruddin, a charming and well-spoken officer. He seemed to feel the same way towards me. Later, I learned that everyone got the same impression from him.

I also met with a couple of friends who lived in Pindi and watched a movie called "Dilhaar" in the evening. The next day, I took a bus across the Akorakhotok Bridge to Nowshera. There I took a tanga (a horse-drawn cart) and then went on to cross the Boat Bridge in surprising comfort. From the landing, the road wound ahead between two mountains which appeared to be covered in marble rock. The chips that came out of marble mining were used to create mosaics. The road was cut through some of this marble rock. The mountains were not too tall and I travelled through in a tanga, swaying from left to right and watching the scenery all the way to Risalpur. The tangawala set me down at the Officers' Mess, but after looking around, I held him back, reloaded the tanga *with* my luggage, and told him to take me to the C-type Barracks. The C-type Barracks meant two wings on either side and a long concrete barrack in the center. There was a garden too. The path went in at one end of the barracks and out the other. There was a gate, but no gatekeeper. As soon as I arrived, an In-Charge appeared, showed me a piece of paper, led me to my room, and summoned my assigned batman. Senior engineers in the course were given single rooms while juniors shared a double bedroom. The room felt as hot as fire when I entered.

The course would begin in a couple of days. I met an officer at the mess named Captain Haleem. He was a Bangali, the mess secretary – a tough nut. Everyone feared him and that amused me greatly. Here, at least, was one Bangali who was keeping strict control over the Punjabis and Pathans!

The mess was huge. It had bedrooms, a green room, billiards room, lawn and a dining hall, which could seat a large number of people at once. Sometimes a band played in the dinner hall. There were over a hundred members, and multiple ongoing courses including the entire engineering degree course. We were here to do the field course. Sometimes senior officers from the Core of Engineers would come.

Parties were held quite often and then there was Mess Night. We had to wear our mess kits there. Senior officers would be invited and, in short, it became quite festive. I would have to rent or buy a bicycle to get around here. As my course duration was just three months, I decided to rent a bicycle. All the officers owned bikes while a couple had cars or motorbikes. I was introduced to Lieutenant Zahid Latif – a good officer, quite loud though. We were happy to meet each other – he had been to Faujdarhaat Cadet College with Ekramullah. I believe they were in the first batch of students from this college. I began to play squash with him at the club which later became my habit while he turned to beer.

Classes began and I got introduced to all the faculty at the Military College of Engineering (MCE). Only the most meritorious officers in the Core of Engineering came to teach here. One of them was Dr. Major Sajjat Pathan who taught with great sincerity. Then there was Dr. Colonel GS Butt who taught Soil Science. A very good officer. The environment was congenial for studying as students, teachers and officers came together as equals. Exams were also taken as part of the program. Those who passed these exams would remain in the Core of Engineers while those who failed would be moved to other cores. Shahed Hasan Selim from Puratan Kashba in our Jessore couldn't make it to the end – he was the only one who couldn't. We used to stay at the same hostel along with PMR Zahid and Taskin. There were also two or four others as the hostel was quite large. Zahed Latif was a senior, an officer in the 29th PMA batch.

Fieldwork began all of a sudden – both during the day and the night. Fieldwork meant placing mines and deactivating them, installing barbed wire or being taught to launch the Baily Bridge. We created floating bridges with pontoons or flat boats over which cars, or even tanks, could cross. We did this over the Kabul River. We also had to learn to recognize the stars in the night sky – which star appeared in which direction and gauging directions from them to figure out which way to go in the dark of night. This was so that we could move in the dark during battles and continue the fight. Whatever was taught in Field Engineering all had to do with war. I always carried a stick with me whenever we went on fieldwork, especially when it came to walking or going somewhere. This grabbed everyone's attention and they were curious about why I carried it, where I got it or who gave it to me. We had a teacher named Major Sharif. One day, he sat down by the River Kabul and asked me to tell the group about the stick. I said, "I really don't want to say anything about it because no one will believe me." But upon their insistence, I explained:

"When I was in Azad Kashmir, I was sent to inspect the Tokhri Camp in Titwala, which had been affected by the war of '65. In '48, the battle had raged at 7229 feet due to the expertise of both the Indian and Pakistani forces. And so, now they fought at a height of 13,000 feet. Havildar Sadek, Naik Yunus and I set off for the area one morning and arrived there by evening. We stopped at a post halfway up at 6 or 7000 feet where we had lunch. Then we continued the climb up. This was a bad idea since there is less oxygen higher up on the mountain. It is almost impossible to stay there. The entire area is covered in snow during the winter, so much so that, for five months, no one could climb up nor down. There wasn't much to see – just whiteness and more mountains. On one side was India, on the other, Pakistan. When it got late, we ate dinner. The fireplace was lighted inside the beck. We had sleeping bags. If an officer visited, he slept in the smaller beck while others slept in the larger beck. Two guards, however, stayed with the officer. Their duty was to wake him up after four hours because after that time, no oxygen could pass through the lungs. If anyone overslept, that would be his final sleep. And so, around midnight, the guards woke me up too.

I warmed myself at the fire, and then, peeking out of the door, I saw the moon lighting up the mountainside and making it glitter. What an unforgettable sight! It scared me and I quickly shut the door to return to the fireside. Two new guards arrived to replace the previous ones. I slept again at 2 am and woke at 6. We stayed there another day but there was really nothing to do. We just had to see that things were in place and return. It was the same on the Indian side. They had their becks and their machine guns, and so did we. One stared back at the other. They had mics, and so did we. We cursed them over the mic and they gave them as good as they got. After forty-five minutes, a break was announced, just like in class. After five minutes, the cursing resumed and this had become a game for both sides.

I didn't object to any of it. I let it go on. The next day, accompanied by Naik Yunus, I climbed down from the mountaintop. Havildar Sadek stayed behind. We stopped at the same camp on the way down for lunch and continued on our way at 1 pm. I realized that I couldn't walk very well – my knees had swollen up. But we had to climb down. Yunus was in front, I behind. After a while, Yunus had gone on ahead of me. Suddenly, from behind a huge boulder, I saw an old man appear, white turban on his head, a white shawl draped over his body, a stick in his hand. The sight of him would inspire respect in anyone. He stopped me and said, 'No one has ever gained anything from the use of pistols and guns and gunpowder. You should leave these. Take this stick – it will not only help you climb the mountain now but it will come in handy for the rest of your life.' Taking the stick, I thanked him and resumed my descent. I was going to toss the stick a little later but thinking the old man might be watching, I looked behind me to see him gone! Where had he vanished to? I climbed back up the mountain and searched for him among the boulders but there was no sign of the old man. I shivered in surprise and decided not to throw the stick away. I carried it down with me and it has remained with me ever since. I always have it with me during any fieldwork or exercise or when I go anywhere. I have walked thousands of miles with this stick by now."

Everyone listened in surprise. I thought they would laugh at me but they didn't. Major Sharif was mesmerized. He said, "You should keep this stick."

Fieldwork was soon over for the day and I went down to the bank of the River Kabul. I had figured out that if I studied for about two hours a day and did my homework, I could easily get first or second place. After classes, I went back to the mess to eat. I used my bike – there was enough parking for a hundred bikes in that place. In the meantime, the weather began to get warmer – it rose quite high in the daytime and dipped in the evenings. Many slept at that time but instead of sleeping, I would hang a sign on my door that said "Sleeping," turn on the fan lightly and finish studying in the evening. If there were any sports, I would participate in that too. If I had no evening classes, I would shower and go to the club. I made some friends – Ashraf, Selim, Mahtab. Sometimes Zahed Latif, sometimes the teachers joined us.

Many classmates began to follow my example. They did everything I did. They copied me so much that I decided to play a joke on them one day just for the fun of it. After breakfast, I returned to the mess, took my bike and rode through the main gate of the college and straight out of the gate on the other side. Everyone followed suit. I hitched my bike against a tree and peed. Two or three others came to do the same. But by then, they had realized what was going on and began a hullabaloo. I kept a straight face. I took my bike and rode straight back to class. Major Javed had entered in the meantime and was checking the time. We were late by three or four minutes. He kept everyone standing and asked, "What's going on?" After I explained, he couldn't decide what he should do at that moment because there was no rule in the army book for situations like this. He then warned us and said, "Don't let this happen again." He also said, "And don't follow others like dogs or foxes. Everyone has the routine. Follow that."

After class, no one said anything to me and I remained silent as well.

Major Sharif's office was situated right next to the main entrance. He never turned on the fan and hardly ever had the lights on, that too just the table lamp. He studied day in and day out, bare-bodied, going to bed at 9 pm. His batman set up his portable cot outside on the road. No cars were allowed on that road. I don't know if we were drunk or if we just decided to have some fun, but one night, around midnight, a few of us lifted that cot on our shoulders with Major Sharif still snoring on it. We carried the cot over

North Road to the club's swimming pool and then, into the pool went the cot with Major Sharif in it. And we ran. In the morning, four of us were summoned. The senior instructor, the Major, had called us. We went, but in the meantime, we had realized what we had done. The Major asked, "What happened last night?" We appeared to fall from the sky. "Last night? We were in the hostel as usual, studying." The Major said, "Listen. Omar Gul at the club saw everything and he's the one who got you drunk."

We looked at each other and remained silent. We were dismissed. Later, though, a summary of evidence was made. We weren't court martialed but we did get severely reprimanded and a warning red mark on our careers.

For a few days after this, we were good. Then, we decided that we should go to another club on Saturday, either in Nowshera or Peshawar. We would sometimes head out on Sunday evening or night and go to Risalpur. The other three in my group had cars. One night, five or six of us rode motorbikes to an academy of the Risalpur Pakistan Air Force where there were a few fighter planes for training. There was an airstrip so no one was allowed inside. But our mischievous minds came up with an idea – we would enter there with our motorbikes. So we turned on the headlights and sped through the gates like comets. There were guards and militia at the gate but they were all asleep. We entered at one end of the academy and out the other onto North Road and back to the hostel. Next day in class, the Chief Instructor summoned four out of the six of us to his office. We went and were questioned about the previous night. Of course, our reaction was as usual – we knew nothing: "Sir, what are you saying? We were in our rooms, studying. Before that, we were in the mess, eating, then we went to the club to chat for a while, and back to the hostel to sleep." The SI Shaheb interrupted, "It's not that simple! We know that there were six of you but we got only four names. That's why we called you. Who were the other two?" We said, "We haven't met each other since class yesterday." He yelled, "Never lie in the army. The siren went off last night because of your activities. The air head was alerted and so was the army headquarter. The alert even reached Pindi. We thought an Indian aircraft had landed here. Do you understand the magnitude of what you did?"

Although we hadn't realized it the night before, we certainly did now but there was nothing we could do except look at each other. Seeing that we wouldn't say anything, the SI dismissed us. We were again subjected to summary of evidence and court martialed on a small scale. As a result, each of us lost three months of seniority. We then decided that we would stop all this mischief and become good, studious officers. We would even abandon the club.

But it is one thing to make a resolution and another to stick to it. We couldn't stop going to the club altogether – large events were held there and officers, senior officers, came from Pindi to attend, the GOC and Director among others. Bottle after bottle was emptied. The band played and everyone had a good time, both at the club and the mess. Sometimes there were mujra dances[47] at the club too. And then there were foreign dancers from Egypt and Turkey who performed belly dances. I had no idea who brought them or who paid for them. Our job was to enjoy – and so we did. Once a month, a movie was shown at the club – an English movie. We watched those too. Basically, we were kept busy in as many ways as possible. That was the army's way – keep yourself occupied or keep others occupied. If you could keep others busy, you were saved. Otherwise, you would have to find a way to occupy yourself. That was also the job of the Military College of Engineering.

[47] A dance form originating from the courtesans of the Mughal court.

One afternoon, I learned that a bus had been rented and everyone was going to Peshawar. An East Pakistani movie was being shown in the theater there. The movie's name was *Chokori* and the heroine was Shabana. Almost every member of the audience showed their appreciation and excitement towards the movie, blowing whistle after whistle. Then, for the next several days, all anyone could do was sing songs from the movie, say its dialogs, talk about Shabana, the director, Ehtesham, and so on. Some even went to see it repeatedly and it became quite an ordeal to get away from *Chokori*.

I was taking basic courses. YEO was a basic course at that time and after several tests, there was a final exam. It soon became time to take that final exam. I sat for it and I didn't think much of it. I stood first in the class. Only one student received an AX and that was me. For this, I was much congratulated. Now it was time for me to say goodbye to Risalpur.

Chapter Six

My New Workplace: Lahore

My posting orders arrived – I was going back to Lahore – to Division 11, 3rd Engineering Battalion. I took leave from everyone and headed to Lahore by train.

A naik received me at the station and took me first to the Unit. It was morning. I met with the Battalion Adjutant who proceeded to take me to the CO Shaheb, Lt. Col. Faruk Rashid, a small man in size. He stood up from his chair, shook my hand and asked me to sit. Then he asked me to tell him about myself. Then he said, "You have been posted to 111 Light Engineering Company. The OC there is Major Janjua. You have to report to him but you can go there tomorrow. You can meet the 2IC today."

He summoned the Adjutant, ordered him to take me to meet the 2IC, and then to bring me back so I could have a cup of tea with him. I stood at attention, saluted, and left. This man had once been in Jessore. He was newly married. He had liked Jessore very much and had a good time. He had gone to the theater in Jessore, attended many events, drank date-palm juice, and watched how this juice was harvested. I heard all this from him just a short while ago. I hadn't met him in Jessore at that time, but there are some people to whom one can take an instant liking and Faruk Rashid was one of them.

I went to Adjutant Captain Mumtaz's office where he served me a cup of tea. He was a grim-looking man. After my tea, he escorted me to the 2IC's office next door. He introduced me, "This is Lt. Shahid. He is here after completing the YO5 course. Previously, he was the Adjutant of the 5th Engineers Battalion." The 2IC stood up, shook my hand, and asked me to sit. The Adjutant left. The 2IC's name was Mansoor, a fair, tall, and slender handsome man. Later I learned that he was a superseded officer but had been granted one extension. He spoke directly, a soft-spoken man from India. He was born there and he had been at this battalion for a while now. He had a wife and children. He asked about my home and family. When he offered me tea, I said I had already had some. So he summoned the peon and told him to escort me to the mess.

For some time now, I have been referring to the mess as a hostel, but in the army, there are no hostels. They are known as messes. However, different messes have different names. The peon took me to the mess where my batman was already waiting for me. His name was Hakim from Barisal. I took a nap once I got there.

The batman woke me up at lunch time. I got dressed and went to the dining room, a large, well-equipped hall room. It even had a bar. This is one area that all the dining rooms had. The bar would open in the evening. As I had my lunch, I was introduced to a captain called Rabbani. He was from East Pakistan. He was Governor General Atiq's ADC.

My life in Lahore began once more. I found out how long it would take me to get to work, but the next day, I saw that my batman had rented a bicycle for me. He had cleaned it and left it in a spot where I was sure to see it. Having a bike here was a matter of pride. I headed out in the morning and arrived at my unit and left my bike at the designated stand. I walked for a while into the campus with the officer sent by the Adjutant to accompany me. At the end of the walk, we came to a building surrounded by trees. A wall surrounded the building – this was the OC's office. I was taken to Major Janjua's office, and knocking on the door, I asked, "Sir, may I come in?" There was no reply. He had already noted my arrival but he acted

as though he was very busy with some paperwork. His face was hidden behind some papers. It wasn't hard for me to guess that he was neither busy nor reading anything. Again, I asked, "Sir, may I come in?" He seemed startled as he looked up and replied, "Yes, please, yes." I entered and saluted again. The room shook from the stomp of my boots – my salute had been quite forceful. He seemed very happy with my salute – in the army, a salute and the accompanying sound of the boot on the ground caused a rise or fall in the mercurial happiness of some officers. He was one of them, I could see. He was tall and looked heavily sunburnt. There was no way to tell what his original skin color had been like, but it now looked like that of an old turtle. He also appeared to be quite advanced in years.

He then proceeded to give me a lot of information about the 111 Light Engineering Company so that I was well aware. Later, though, I learned that most of this information was incorrect. He offered me tea but I refused. So he came out himself and called a peon to show me to my room. I was shown to a room about four or five feet away. The room was furnished with just a table and a chair. Nothing else. At ten-thirty or so, I was summoned by the OC. He said, "Come with me. Tea is served at the Battalion at this hour. All the officers will be there. We have tea there every day. Even the CO comes if he's at the Unit."

We walked to the battalion headquarters where some tea and snacks were laid out in a room. The CO arrived, accompanied by Major Anis. Later on, I learned that he was a very good officer, who had been to Staff College. The 2IC also came, and so did the Adjutant and a Pathan Major named Habibullah. They were followed by two Second Lieutenants. The entire battalion was being run by these few men when there were supposed to be eighteen or twenty officers. I got introduced to everyone and had tea with them. Major Anis, the SO2-P, took me to his office. To be an SO2-P, one needed to be an engineer, or even better, a PSC. Major Anis's room was quite large. He had a drawing board on the wall and I could tell he was a busy man. When he released me, I went back to my company.

In my company, there were two officers – Major Janjua and me. The OC summoned me again. He instructed the subedar to show me everything. The first thing I noticed were the many cars. Then, Baily Bridge, the pontoon boat, etc. All these were filled with necessary items. This was also known as a Bridge Company. Then I received some paperwork and letters. I dealt with them and the next day, I asked the subedar to fill me in with the TOE so I would know everything about the company.

A couple of days passed in this manner. I tried to understand the workings of the company. Before I inspected the cars, equipment, weapons, and so on, I had to meet the troops. So, accordingly, I went to the mess. Lunch was at noon. I walked around with the subedar and met everyone. Some smiled and I smiled back. These men had been in the battalion parade earlier. The CO conducted the parade. The Adjutant handed them over to the 2IC who then handed them over to the CO. The officers would stand at one side. PT or drills would take place as scheduled. Classes went on till noon. Taught subjects included English language, Urdu language, and some basic lessons on discipline in the army. Then there was rifle training as well as dismantling and reassembling weapons. Once a week, the weapons were cleaned. Of all these, the job I enjoyed most was making the insides of the rifles' barrels shine. I would take a rag and tie it to the end of a rope. This rope would be threaded in at one end and pulled out from the other. This is known as the "pull-through." Repeated pull-throughs resulted in shiny barrels. If the barrel isn't sparkling, it impedes the bullet. The barrel could also blow up in such cases when the rifle was fired. So this was a very important task in the army. However, this was all hearsay. I had never actually seen a rifle blow up.

I checked the quarter guard, then gradually, I mixed in with the troops. I was even there for the nightly roll call. I looked closely into many things: who had taken how many days of leave, who hadn't and why they hadn't; whether everyone wrote home or received letters, if they got their ration, etc. When salaries were dispensed, I noticed that the subedar or naib subedar was handing out the money. This didn't look right to me. I said, "I will hand out the soldiers' salaries." This was something that Imtiaz Azim had actually taught me: "Stand and watch once the soldiers are served their food, hand out salaries yourself, allow them a little entertainment, and they'll be eating out of your hand." So, when I took matters into my own hands, though the subedar or naib subedar were not happy, the OC certainly was. Later, I heard that he had also been a soldier once. From there, he had risen to this position gradually after the Partition. Of course, this was a big achievement on his part.

One day, I said to Major Janjua, "Sir, it's important that we check the fitness of all those cars and whether they're capable of transporting equipment a hundred miles away over the bridge and returning." He hesitated and then replied, "We'll need the CO's permission." We got that permission too. The OC couldn't go, so I was ordered to. We headed out slowly one evening with a fleet from Walton to the main road. We crossed the Ravi Bridge and headed towards Multan. We didn't have to go far before one after another, the cars began to break down. We finally had to stop after fifty miles that night – twenty vehicles were still running and the rest seventy or eighty were knocked out. But this was a thankless job not only did I receive no praise, I was reprimanded by Janjua for upsetting the situation. Later, though, I heard that the CO was very happy.

The next day, the entire EME team, clamps, and all available mechanics set to work. It took almost a week to repair all the vehicles and return with them. But it did make everyone aware of the situation. I realized this later, though, when Major Anis, in his office, smilingly told me, "You've done a great job and deserve praise. Reports from just seven days ago certified everything as fit – and it was Janjua himself who sent them. He just sends in whatever his havildar, subedar or naib subedar hands to him, while they steal the parts, oil, diesel, grease, sell them back, and steal them again!"

I was stunned. "Stealing in the army?!"

Major Anis sighed, "My child, you've just entered the army. Next time, you'll even witness the stealing of a pond, a river, a sea. And if martial law is imposed, then there's no saying what will happen. Everything will be looted then. It is the age of looting. But don't speak a word of this to anyone."

He gave me some tea and then sent me on my way.

Gradually, I began to take the time to explore as I had settled in to my Unit. So I went to the EME mess to see if I could find anyone I knew. There are usually many civilian scholars, but no one that I knew. I was wandering around when suddenly, someone grabbed me. I had to explain who I was, where I had come from, where I was going, whether I knew how to play cards, and so on. The gentleman then introduced himself. He was Golam Ahmed, Senior Captain. Without pausing, he continued, "You know, I'm not being promoted and it won't happen either. Did you know that I was awarded the Sitara-e-Jurat with double SJ. In fact, I got a double Sitara-e-Jurat during *this* war." All I could think was, "Oh goodness!"

He dragged me to his car –a Skoda. I would have to accompany now to the gymkhana, which I had already visited. But he had to show me again, especially two specific things. One was the bar and the other was the card-playing area. It was a huge hall room with many tables laid out. Bridge, Flash, and Rummy were the popular games. Many of the clientele knew him. He sat at one table with me by his side and asked whether I was interested in playing. If so, he would get the pieces. These round wooden or plastic pieces or discs had to be paid for – prices varied by color. There were discs priced from Rs.100 to Rs.1. Three others joined us and each arranged their discs in stacks, ready to play. The stakes at this table were the lowest: Rs.0.1. A senior captain, Golam Ahmed said, "Not 101 points, but Rs.0.1." I understood then that it was 100 points for Rs.100, which was taken to be 1 point in 100.

The cards were dealt and then the orders for different types of drinks were given. We were also continuously served pakora and kababs. The food quickly disappeared with the drinks as the game went on. The senior captain began to lose and around 11 pm, he suddenly stood up. His friends protested, "It's not midnight yet!" Without a word, he signaled at me to get up. We left the gymkhana and he dropped me off at the mess without a word.

One day, Jahangir Nasrullah appeared – at the time, he was Captain. He had been posted to 3rd Engineering Battalion. We were very excited to see each other. His aunt had got married to Brigadier Qayyum Chowdhury, brother of Professor Munier Chowdhury, and he had been to visit their ancestral home in East Pakistan. He had stayed and eaten there. He had also been sightseeing. He took me to his home at 9 Davis Road. His mother was a doctor, a professor at Jinnah Medical College – a women's medical college – where his sister was studying. His older brother Omar Nasrullah was also a doctor.

It soon became time to compile the confidential annual report. Major Janjua wrote his report on me and called me to read it. Unfortunately, that report could only be decipherable to him – and on top of that, there were innumerable spelling errors. As I read, I saw at one point that he had written, "He hardly works." What?! This was the report after all my efforts? I saw red. I folded up the sheet, put it in my mouth and ate it. Major Janjua was so shocked, he almost cried. He stood up immediately and headed towards the battalion headquarters, while I returned to my office. Soon, I received a summons from Headquarters. I went. I was shown into the Commanding Officer's room where I saw Janjua already seated. The CO did not ask me to sit. He asked me directly, "Did you eat the ACR?" I replied, "Sir!" He asked, "May I know why?" Without hesitation, I said, "The report was sloppy and on top of that, at the end, he wrote, 'he hardly works.'" The CO asked, "What do you mean?" Before I could answer, Major Janjua spoke up, "He works a lot and puts in a good amount of effort. That's why I wrote it." I looked at the CO to see him smiling. He said, "Shahid, please step outside and wait in the Adjutant's office." A few moments later, Major Janjua came out and as he passed by the Adjutant's office, he gave me a dark look as if to say, "Just you wait!" In the meantime, the 2IC entered the CO's room and soon I was called in. The CO said, "Shahid, you're going on an Adjutant posting. So please find out what your responsibilities will be. And next time, please don't eat the ACR. Just protest."

I guess he had called the Adjutant and told him the same thing. He held out his hand and said, "Congratulations! You're the next Adjutant." The 2IC also said the same thing when I came out.

Within a day or two of assuming responsibility as Adjutant, I realized that there was quite a bit of work involved here. I had a phone connection with the CO and he could summon me at any time. He would try

to explain any job to me himself. He instructed me thus: “Have an “In” file and an “Out” file. Just routine work. Then there’s the Adjutant’s job: sometimes you’ll required to pass on the CO’s orders to the company. Then the real job. Our 3rd Engineer Battalion has been tasked with constructing the Kasur Fortress, otherwise known as the Kasur Line. It’ll be almost 300 miles long of which the Engineering Battalion is responsible for a 100. So, if India ever attacks Pakistan, the Kasur Fortress will be its defense, so that Indian forces can’t get to Lahore. India’s very close to Lahore. So, this job is urgent. That’s the bitter lesson learned from ’65.”

Chapter Seven

Building the Kasur Fortress

I was now an Adjutant, a very important position. I was also becoming well-know. Kasur was a small town but one with an ancient culture. This was the first time I had seen the city. A rest house by the BRB Canal was to be our project office. Of the two rooms there, I was to stay in one. The other would serve as the office room. I had a chef to cook for me and a sepoy to run errands.

Those who would be staying here for the work were assigned tents. We were set up at the midpoint. The country spread fifty feet in one direction, and fifty in the other. It was possible to travel to most places by jeep, and sometimes by truck. The fortress would be 300 miles long but the 11th Division would build 100 miles. Our work included MG posts, recoilless rifles post (that would work against tanks), section platoon posts, battalion posts, brigade posts, ammunition dump, and so on. All of these were underground posts. We would also build fifty towers – some 100 feet high, but most of them 50. These towers would be constructed by Deko Company in Lahore, but we would have to assemble them at the site and dig the foundation. The CO had brought in a retired garrison engineer he knew, and this man would do the work. His job was to create a budget, invite and execute tenders, assign jobs, etc. Those contractors working with high security clearance would be listed and the high competitive tenders would be administered with them only. I spoke to the naib subedar in charge, a member of the Pakistan National Basketball team. A very tall man, his body seemed to be built with iron. This was the man I chose for the tower construction job. Then we brought in more naib subedars, havildars, and so on, with some being transferred here. Each was assigned as a commander in a different location to supervise the contractors' work. We would supervise the towers.

The workload increased. In the meantime, if there was a good movie in town, the CO would leave to watch it with his wife. Getting their tickets was also part of our duties. He would attend different events as well – when there was a good play on at Alhamra, if a cultural group arrived from East Pakistan, and so on. We would have to arrange tickets for these programs too. In short, we were never short of work. The main job, though, went on as scheduled: the CO would explain the work to me and I would take care of them. Then he began calling me to his home to take down my daily duties from him at six in the morning. We would be done by seven, or even earlier. Then I would go to the mess for breakfast and to dress for work. After that, a two-mile bike ride to the office. The CO left for the Divisional Headquarters and the Brigade Headquarters.

The GOC took me to the Divisional Headquarters and introduced me to Major General Mazhar, who had become the Frontiers' governor. The CO said, "This is Engineer Shahid. He designed the defense work and is also overseeing it."

From there we went to the 21st Brigade headquarters where we met a handsome, evergreen officer called Brigadier Malik, a member of the SSG[48] and a pilot. He seemed to have no space left on his chest for more medals. He had been in the war of '65. I liked him and so did he, especially after hearing of working style and my dedication. Within the next couple of days, I met the commanders of the other two brigades. They were interested but not that much. They didn't really want the pressure, but they all agreed to support me

[48] The Pakistan Army Special Service Group

as much as possible. They would inspect the posts and mark them. They would mark all the positions on the map which I could copy on to my map or on the divisional headquarters map if I wished. If there was any trouble on the site, they would come to solve it, but the site could not be located among houses, mosques or the graveyard.

Within a few days, I realized that I would have to work from five in the morning to eleven at night. The CO began supervising so rigorously that I had no time for myself at all. He would ask for every minute detail on the progress of the work on each site. He would immediately offer suggestions or instructions if there was anything lacking. And thereafter give directions for the next day or even the day after. I was in such a state that I prayed – "Allah, please make those two days into one. Otherwise, I can't do this anymore." I began to realize that though I had done many things in my life, there was never any end to work. The more one worked, the more the workload increased. At one point, work became an addiction.

Seeing the CO's restlessness, one would assume that a war was about to begin the next day between Pakistan and India. So every day, I would do my job as Adjutant in the office until two, and then until ten or eleven at night, I would work on the project in the SO2P's room.

One day, as I sat working, the one foot square bay window between me and the 2IC, Monsur Shaheb, was pulled back noisily. Monsur Shaheb stretched out his neck and asked, "Shahid, have you read the Six Points?" I was astounded. I had heard of the Six Points, but why was it being brought up here? He asked again, "Have you seen it?" I said, "No." He rolled up a piece of paer and passed it to me. "Read this and keep it carefully" saying which he quickly closed the window. This was the first time I read the Six Points. My relationship with politics was negligible but having read that piece of paper, I realized that East Pakistan was agitated and wanted a separate state.

A lot of people here knew about the Six Points but pretended to be ignorant. It was never discussed in front of the Bangalis, but behind the scenes, they too were becoming agitated. To them, Bangalis meant Hindus. East Pakistan meant a few Muslims among whom most were Biharis, some were from Uttar Pradesh and West Pakistan, and a few aristocratic East Pakistanis. The rest were all traitor Hindus. One thing should be noted – whenever any political leader from East Pakistan came to visit West Pakistan, they would be invited to Pakistani homes, escorted in cars, given lots of gifts, and essentially brainwashed. But this was not the case with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Never. To the Pakistanis, thus, he was irritating. But Sheikh Mujibur Rahman got along well with some respectable leaders such as Wali Khan, Daulatana, Bugti, etc. There were many others but I didn't know them nor got a chance to. But Sheikh Mujib was now travelling quite often to Pindi via Lahore, because there was no flight from Dhaka to Pindi. On top of that, the capital city had been shifted from Karachi to Islamabad, which was now developing.

Soon, the bay window slid open again. Monsur Shaheb, restless, asked, "Shahid, where are the Six Points? Where are they?" I said, "How should I know?" Nervously, he asked again, "What?! I just gave them to you." I replied nonchalantly, "Oh. That piece of paper." He said, "Give it to me right now. It was given to us by the army. Now they want it back. I think finally they're waking up. But it's difficult to predict what they think at any time."

As soon as I took the piece of paper out of the drawer and handed it back, the window slid shut again.

One morning, I received a phone call from the office of the Commander of the 21st Brigade. I was told that my presence was required at the Officers' Club in the evening. I was needed to play cards. I acquised and hung up, thinking to myself that my fame in cards had spread here too. I had a lot to do but I went to the club in the evening. Bukhari, Riaz and one other person were already there. We sat at the table and were supplied with water, tea, kababs, pakoras, and local drinks. The game went on. When we finished, it was eleven at night and the Brigadier drove me to the mess. I had said, "There's no need, sir. I can take a taxi." He laughed at my words and replied, "It's a government vehicle. So am I. And you too. In the army, the game too is government business. Come, I'll drop you off."

I was called to play cards several times after this.

The Core Commander, Lt. General Bahadur Sher Khan, uncle to Rashid Khan, arrived in Lahore and summoned all the officers. Officers of the 10th, 11th and 23rd Divisions with their JCOs all assembled in a huge hall. At exactly eight, he arrived, driving himself. Next to him sat his Colonel staff with the driver and ADC in the back. He strode in, without a greeting or a handshake to anyone. The stage was empty – no chairs or tables had been placed there – just a microphone. After a few cursory words, he came to the point. There were three issues. Number one – the JCO Shahebs were responsible for creating conflicts among the officers – this was their main job. Whatever occurred in the units was their doing – they started them and they solved them. Especially if it was Command Week. He then lifted his walking stick and said that for as long as he was Core Commander, he would wield that stick in a certain area of the JCOs' bodies to maintain order. And he would take it out only on the day he retired. This could have been very funny, but not a sound was to be heard. Everyone was silent – the JCOs, the Brigade Commanders, Colonels, and Majors – and we were nothing in comparison. He spoke again. Number two – those officers who rode motorbikes and Vespas must wear helmets. If anyone disobeyed, he would give them the medicine they deserved. Number three – no officer must gain weight. Those who were overweight must lose it.

Then, without a farewell of any kind, he strode off the same way he had come, got in his jeep and drove off. After that, one had to see it to believe it, but all day long, officers – from the entire Core and Division – were running helter-skelter, carrying out orders.

When work began, I stayed at times in Lahore, at times in Kasur. I also travelled to other sites outside Kasur. This was a huge area and I was the only officer. The rest of the work had to be overseen by JCOs and havildars. The good thing was that the contractors were quite experienced. One day, I was sitting in my office when I saw an enormous man exit the CO's office and approach my door. I asked him to come in and he introduced himself as Khaleque, a contractor. He had got the job order and was already working. He came to meet me as he hadn't had a chance earlier.

That evening, there was a farewell dinner for GOC General Mazhar. Some elite civilians and all the officers of our division were present. There too, I saw Khaleque having a good time with the GOC. From afar, I even saw him place a hand on his shoulder a couple of times. To understand why, I asked the CO, "Sir, that man came into my office this morning and now I see him talking familiarly with the GOC. Who is he really?" The CO replied, "Don't you know him? He used to be a minister, albeit before the martial law. Before that, he was a good hockey player – very well-known."

I didn't approach Mr. Khaleque after that. In fact, I avoided him. I thought I'd deal with it later, but one day, we came face to face in Kasur. I said, "The other day you didn't tell me who you really are. Instead,

you addressed me as sir and I kept calling you Khaleque Shaheb. That wasn't appropriate." He stopped me and said in Urdu, "It's the chair, the chair. The chair is everything."

I met the other contractors too. One of them was a retired major from Pindi's armor core, also an engineer. Another was a pure Lahorian and a very wealthy man. Work progressed. I told the CO one day, "Sir, I don't think it's possible to work in two places at the same time. If you agree, we can place the new officer who just arrived, Mohsin, in my place or take over as Adjutant."

He didn't like my second proposal. Instead, he said, "Do one thing – take him to Kasur with you. Let him stay for a few days and show him how you operate."

Mohsin said, "Sir, the sooji ka halwa in Kasur is famous. Would you like some?"

On Sunday morning, we went to the bazaar in Kasur to find a long line outside the luchi-halwa shop. People had come from afar for the food. Finally, we ate some. With the ghee oozing out and the halwa stuffed with pistachios and cardamoms, it was divine! Later, I asked the halwa-wala to show me the recipe, which he did, and I make that halwa even today.

I began to show Mohsin around the worksite. He was a very honest and qualified officer. In the meantime, we were told that the GOC was coming to inspect the site with two or three brigrade and battalion commanders. They were especially keen to see one of the towers. We prepared accordingly. There was a tower in Jhaman. This was where our East Bengal Regiment had fought bravely and heroically during the Indo-Pak War of '65. The Bangali soldiers had made a name for themselves and this was where the Indians had dropped bombs. We even found a bomb that had failed to explode. It probably weighed around a thousand pounds and had it gone off, the village would have been destroyed. A team of bomb experts came to see the bomb. Then the bomb disposal company was summoned to destroy the device. A wall had to be constructed around the bomb for this purpose, so that the surrounding damage was minimized. A day and time was fixed for the task, the villagers were informed and asked to remain in their homes.

The bomb disposal squad arrived with the officers at the scheduled time, the JCO with them. But when we went to the spot, we found no bombs there. Where did such a huge bomb go? Things were in a turmoil. Finally, we discovered that when the villagers found out how badly they could be hurt by the bomb, they extracted it, mounted it on the back of a donkey and disposed of it in the BRB Canal. This became the cause of much laughter and jokes all around. Finally, though, the water in the BRB Canal was slightly dredged and the bomb was blasted in there. Unfortunately, I was not there at the time.

One morning, the General, Brigadier, Colonel all arrived at Kasur. I watched their implacement of some MGs and RR bunkers, then I escorted them to Jhaman. Seeing the tower, someone asked, "How tall is it?" I replied, "Fifty." Some commented that it would have been better had it been a hundred feet and they could have climbed it. I said, "Sir, if the Indian border isn't far, we can't make this tower a hundred feet high. Even though this is the border, we can see India from here. See, that's Khemkaran over there." I turned to see a couple of them staring towards Khemkaran like idiots. Actually, nothing could be seen but the road led to Khemkaran. Pakistan had taken over in '65. Once, an EME officer came and demanded to eat Kasuri semolina and halua, luchi, and see Nurjahan's home because he hadn't been able to in '65.

There was a village right behind the Jhaman tower. The General, Brigadier, Colonel – all stated, "The person who built the tower should climb it and show everyone." I had climbed the tower many times so I

shot up now to the observation post and took a look around before coming down again. The GOC had no desire to climb up but one of the brigadiers, who had been showing off, quickly scrambled up to the observation post. Behind him went a lieutenant colonel. The ladder was of iron, with a rounded grille along the side. But once they were up, they realized that the weight of three people was causing the tower to move this way and that with the wind. They observed the area through binoculars and then climbed down. Another couple of men went up later. Someone suddenly declared, "Someone will have to stay on as OP." I responded, "Sir, how can one man stay up there for four hours? The post rocks in the wind. What will happen if there is a storm?" The GOC spoke up, "This is the army. Here, an order is an order."

It was decided that a junior artillery officer would stay and this would be used as an observation post. However, if there was a war, then someone would definitely need to stay there. From there, I took them all to Kasur where I showed them the Kasur Fortress canal defense. Everyone was quite impressed. Now India would have no need to come to Kasur or go to Lahore.

Someone asked, "Sir, if India already knows what we're doing here, what is the point of it?"

The GOC was surprised. "Our intention *was* to let them know."

Once everyone left for Lahore, I returned to my station. In the meantime, I got a letter asking me to go to Baluki where a bridging camp was being constructed. I was to leave Mohsin in charge. So I did. But I was taken aback once I arrived. I had never heard nor been told that Mazhar had become the company commander. He, though, had arrived just three or four days before. Mazhar displayed all the actions of a typical Punjabi who has met an old friend (even if that friendship was only a day old) – creating a hullaballoo, yelling, cursing, and slapping backs. Almost five to seven minutes passed in this excitement. Finally, he hugged me – almost in a death-grip – and wouldn't let go. After extricating myself, I embraced my friend from Lahore, Jahangir Nasrullah, Captain and Company Commanding Officer. The CO called me into his office tent and I reported for duty. He said, "Sit." There were stools to sit on in the camps. Once I sat, he said, "Shahid, you should never let opportunities such as these go if you want to advance your career. This bridging camp is a necessity. So, even though you're busy, I asked for you to be sent here."

Once I was released, we all had lunch together.

Apparently, some dogs had been causing a ruckus at the camp – fighting, barking madly, leaving bones all around the kitchen area. As we were eating, the CO said, "Can't anyone shut these dogs up?" Within a few moments, we heard shots. We rushed outside to find Jahangir Nasrullah standing there, rifle in hand. He had killed the dogs. The problem was that there is nothing written the army manual that allows barking dogs to be shot with the rifle in a soldier's hands. When the CO questioned him about what he had done, Nasrullah replied, "Sir, the CO's desire is our order. That's why I silenced the dogs." What was the CO to do now? No one had a solution. We had to account for that bullet and say it was used to kill a dog. I remembered the time when a bullet shell went missing at the Pakistan Military Academy. Khaled Mosharraf had made us search for it until three in the afternoon. We could not only not leave until it was found, we could not eat either. He also taught me a lesson that day: "Child, if your rifle is lost, or an officer is lost, or if you are taken prisoner, or if you die somewhere, there is no rest until you recover the lost item. So, recover the item first, and then let your higher commander know."

I don't know how the CO managed the situation but Jahangir stayed on in style.

Letters arrived from and I sent replies back. I also sat at the camp and wrote letters, describing Baluki and everything else as much as possible. Abba had liked Baluki a lot and he would wiggle in a mention in his letter in one way or another just like students did with their essays on the cow and the river. Every month, I diligently sent money home. I spent some of the remaining money on necessities and many years later, I figured out that batman Hakeem was pilfering the rest.

The inauguration of the Bailey Bridge at Baluki took place on the BRB River, though it wasn't quite a river – rather a canal. Then we built pontoons, over which tanks would cross. Baluki is an area with no trees, just a wide stretch of land. There was a rest house on the other bank where there were plenty of trees. This, however, was a very old camp. Those engineer battalions that were posted here would exercise. One day, the CO sent an order – the entire battalion would go to Lahore – on foot – a distance of almost thirty miles.

So we started out for Lahore one morning. After about ten miles, we came upon a mango grove where we settled down for lunch. Men had been sent ahead to set up tables and chairs, and to cook. These arrangements are done very meticulously in the army. The 2IC and the Company Commander sat at the CO's table while Mazhar came to sit at ours. We had been told to eat small amounts. After our meal, we sat back in our chairs and looked upwards. Mazhar immediately spotted a mango. I don't believe there was another mango in the entire grove – just the one, and that too right above our table. Mazhar said, "Shahid, can you a mango?" I replied, "Yes." "Then, climb onto the table and grab it so we can eat. It's very healthy to eat a mango after a meal."

I immediately jumped onto the table and picked the mango. And just then, a beehive broke off the branch and fell on the table. Who cared about mangos now?! We scrambled to get under the table and pulled the tablecloth close around us. Others tried to get in with us and that's when one bee entered our hideout. Seeing that things were not going according to plan, Mazhar ordered, "Get out. Run now! If we don't do it now, we won't be able to." The two of us ran out and through a hedge. Unfortunately, there was another beehive there too. I was running and feeling that my head, mouth, nose, eyes were becoming one large beehive. We spied a pile of hay before us and we both plunged our heads into it. Oh god! How hot! It was like jumping into fire. And on the other end, some bees had managed to get into our pants. The stings were driving us mad. Right then, a sweeper yelled at us, "Get out of there now or you'll die!" Of course, at that point, we didn't know he was a sweeper, but he gave us some stinky clothes to wrap around our heads to escape. He himself stood there, unbothered by the bees.

When the troops arrived to rescue us, they gave us some clean clothes, covered us in sheets, and helped us into jeeps. We were in Lahore like a shot. Mazhar was taken to the hospital while I returned to the mess. Mazhar's condition was much worse as he had more surface area that was affected. The doctor came to take a look at me in the evening. He gently pulled a couple of the stings out and gave me some medicine because I had a temperature. The doctor informed me that Jahangir Nasrullah was really ill. A bee had entered his ear and he was now in the operation theater. He was being injected with some medicine that is usually administered for snake bites. Mazhar was doing better because he had thick skin and the stings didn't all pierce him. He also had a lot of fat under his skin so the poison couldn't do much either. The doctor left after dispensing these information. I had no idea how the night passed. I didn't even eat. In the

morning, the batman said I had been incoherent with the fever. I stayed in bed even though my fever was gone. The next day saw the arrival of the CO who sat for a few minutes, without much conversation. He said, “Sorry” even though I should be the one apologizing! Once he left, the 2IC, Mansoor Shaheb came to visit. He said, “Child, you were saved! Jahangir is doing very poorly. I hope he doesn’t die.”

It took a few days for everything to heal. I went to Kasoor and even stayed a couple of days. In the meantime, we were told that the Core Commander was coming. He wanted to see the re-installment of this tunnel at Kasur. When he arrived with his men, once more, I had to explain everything to him. Then he swiftly climbed down into the tunnel. He wanted to look around in there. It was dark inside, even though we had kept flashlights for everyone there. I handed each person a flashlight. I was told to follow right behind the Core Commander, to be followed by the CO. The Divisional Commander refused to come, but a Brigade Commander did. I saw no one else. The Core Commander asked no questions. He simply observed the area to the left and went out. We followed close behind. It was then I realized that more than half the men hadn’t followed us. Later, I heard that some did, but they had backed out seeing the darkness. The Core Commander was upset. To me, he just said, “Looks good.” That’s it. He then had a word with the CO and left.

The pressure at work grew less and I could relax. The GA, Golam Ahmed, SSG, would sometimes come and pick me up on Saturday evenings to take me to the gym. I play and win while the GA loses. One night, at exactly ten p.m., he suddenly took me out and told me to sit in the car. He said, “Let’s go.” I asked, “Where?” He replied, “Heeramandi.” When I protested, he was shocked and asked, “Are you gay?” Again, I said, “No, of course not!”

In the meantime, the car had turned left. I begged the GA, “Please, I don’t want go. Drop me off here.” Immediately, he took out a small pistol and pointed it at my temple. “Will you go or not?” Shaking, I said, “Absolutely!” The pistol was lowered and the car went on until we stopped in front of a palatial building in Heeramandi. Men in shiny clothes and elaborate turbans bowed and escorted us in. We went past one room into another and I couldn’t believe my eyes. Was this a palace I had entered and this the room of the queen?

The GA said, “Sit down. Have some grapes.” I would have to wait. Sometime later, an incredibly beautiful woman entered with four others. They carried trays of wine covered by doilies, halwa, and so on. Everything was placed before the GA, who stood up. I followed suit. Then ensued bowing on both sides. Two people were saying something continuously. Later, I understood that they were speaking in English. After exchanging pleasantries, the GA said, “Rukhsana, this is my East Pakistani friend, Lt. Shahid of whom I’ve spoken many times to you about before.” Rukhsana gave me a salam and hugged me again. Holding me close to her chest, she called me a sweet little boy. The GA and Rukhsana both laughed at that. Then we all sat on the Persian carpet. Rukhsana poured out some wine for the GA and asked if I had any desire for some. When I declined, she had some juice brought out for me. The GA then introduced Rukhsana to me. He said she was the daughter of a prince but her mother was from Heeramandi. She had studied philosophy in Paris, and now she was the wife of a prince. She sang and danced, but did not offer sex.

The GA had downed two glasses already. Now the two of them were engaged in a philosophical conversation, of which I could make neither head nor tail. In the midst of this, the servers brought in

tandoori roti, chicken, kababs, and salad. The food was mostly ignored but the drinks and philosophy continued. At some point, there was classical singing. What a voice she had!

Rukhsana asked me suddenly, "Are you getting bored? Then you can take a girl into the next room." "Take a girl" meant "can have sex." I shouted, "No!" to which Rukhsana responded with a laugh, "You're still a child. So simple!" She affectionately brushed her fingers under my chin. "I'll dance now. Do you want to watch?" I said, "No, it's ok. Just sing instead."

After lots of *paan*, food, and philosophy, the GA pulled a few thousand rupees from his pocket and threw them on the carpet. Then he dragged himself up by my hand as it was getting late. Rukhsana and he took leave of each other several times. The servants arrived to escort us when Rukhsana hugged me and said, "I wish I had a younger brother like you." I was embarrassed.

The servants helped the GA into the driver's seat, placed his foot on the accelerator and hands on the wheel. One of them started the car and said, "Saabji, you can go now." I closed my eyes and began to recite the Surah Fatiha. I didn't have too many prayers in stock so I resorted finally to reading the *kalemas*.

I visited Rukhsana a couple more times after this with the GA and learned of her strange life. I heard her horrific history from the time of the Mughals. Though I enjoyed listening, I also heard the sad undertones. Why were people's lives like this? I could have written an epic on Heeramandi but I didn't have the time.

Chapter Eight

Preparations for a Wedding

The work pressure had decreased. I submitted an application to the CO for a month's leave this time, as I had not taken as much leave the previous year. The CO asked why I needed a whole month. He acted as though it would be okay to pay many officers even if they had no work to do. There were, of course, some officers who couldn't have more than three or four days of leave. It was actually my fault – I had worked so much during my younger days that I could not stay away from work. It had become an addiction. Regardless of this, I needed the leave now. I had some important work. I said, "Sir, I'm going to get married."

The CO was quite amused. That was the nature of a wedding – anyone who heard about one would be duly pleased. He said, "Sure, you'll get the leave. But has a girl been selected for you?" I replied, "Sir, I saw her in '65 and have been in touch with her father. I meet him when I go home, send him photos. Now I feel that I shouldn't delay any longer. I should get married." The CO didn't seem quite satisfied. He said, "Is it possible to complete everything within a month?"

Well, why not? What *was* there to do for a wedding? We would sit at the wedding altar, the priest would come and complete the formalities. That's it. And if she came back with me, great. If not, she would stay behind and study.

I sold my car after speaking to the CO. Four thousand was the agreed price and the customer was Major Janjua who was approaching retirement. He would use the car to drive around and amuse his grandchildren. I received three thousand and eight hundred rupees. Januja said he would have treat people to celebrate his purchase and so he had decided to keep two hundred rupees from the price for that purpose. The Punjabis always needed a mere excuse to celebrate. At weddings, they left no stone unturned – dances, songs, bhangra, etc.

I notified my family of my arrival in a month – in January of '68, I should be in Dhaka. I did not, however, mention anything about a wedding. I continued to supervise the work at Kasur during this month. As the selected Adjutant had gone to attend a course, I had to sit at his desk. A month soon went by and I boarded the PIA flight, a Boeing. The days of the Super Constellations were over. The new planes were faster, quieter, and more stable. I soon landed in Dhaka. It was easy to tell that we were in Dhaka when the plane flew over airport – such a tiny city, so few houses, and water bodies all around. It was a pretty sight from the sky.

I went to Chapabu's home in Dhaka. The next day, I showed up at 13/4 A, Dhanmondi, around 5.00 pm. I went by rickshaw. As I approached the house, I saw Ameenah strolling outside with a very fair-complexioned young woman. Just like an Anglo-Indian. When Ameenah turned her back to me and began to walk the other way, I was stunned by an incredible sight: a mane of thick, shiny hair cascaded down to her knees and, as she walked, her hair swung in rhythm. Ameenah was dressed in a light-colored sari. I sat on the rickshaw and continued to stare. But Ameenah did not return from where she had gone. So I alighted from the rickshaw and tried to pull my money bag out of the hip pocket of my skin-tight pants. That was the fashion at the time and it took some effort to get my wallet out. I had worn these pants on purpose though. As I turned around after paying the rickshawallah, I saw that the two girls were observing

me from afar. They didn't come forward though. Since it wasn't proper to continue standing there, I pushed open the front gate and was immediately stopped by Ehsan in from their Austin car. He asked, "Do you want a job?" I replied, "Yes." He said, "This won't do. You need to send an application inside an envelope. And yes, don't forget the stamp. Then address it to this house."

As I listened to him, I spied two people peeking at me through the kitchen window. I had informed them of my coming the previous day as well as the reason. So, a little later, Reza came out and invited me inside. Enamul Huq Shaheb was in the drawing room, so that is where I sat. Snacks arrived. We ate, and then my future father-in-law said, "I'm afraid I can't give you a decision right now regarding the reason you have come or that you indicated yesterday." He paused and then asked, "Who will discuss this issue on your behalf?" I said that my elder brother would. I also told him about Chapabu and who she was. He replied, "Then let them come and we can talk."

After my release, when I climbed on to a rickshaw and felt the breeze on my body, I realized how hot I had been feeling. The tension had really built up inside me.

At this point, Chapabu still had no clue about the matter and had, instead, started to look for potential brides herself. My nephew, Khokon, had joined her. He knew of not just one or two girls, but hundreds – his classmates, his seniors, his juniors – every girl was his friend. He even introduced me to a few of them. The last time I was here, he had taken me to meet a girl at the university. He had the girl called out from the Chemistry lab. Perhaps the others didn't have classes at the time or their classes had ended, so this girl was accompanied by some others. Seeing the large group, I went to stand next to the car, and standing about twenty feet away, Khokon was showing off his muscles to the girls. Then he pointed at me and said, "You see that man over there? He is my uncle, Captain Kazi Shahid Ahmed, an engineer in the Pakistan Army. You saw my demo – well, that's how strong he is. Now raise your hand if you're interested in marrying him." Before he could finish, he was on the ground with the girls attacking him soundly. I was inside the car. Even so, he remained enthusiastic.

That night, after dinner, I revealed the Dhanmondi affair to Chapabu, who was extremely excited at the news. Still, in an accusatory tone, she said, "Why didn't you tell me about this before?!"

The next morning, Chapabu herself made a phone call to Dhanmondi and said she would be visiting that evening. We went by car that day – Khokon dropped us off and left. He would be back to pick us up. My Chapabu was sweet, and my future in-laws could not help but be charmed by her words in the Jessore accent. Chapabu gave them a full description of my qualities and background before formally placing the marriage proposal. This time, Haque Shaheb responded – perhaps he had timed Chapabu, so for the next fifteen minutes, he narrated his daughter's qualities, her sportsmanship, results, her studies in Shillong, etc.

I was amazed by both parties. How wonderfully talented that girl was! And so was I! Where did my drinking, gambling, gym, and smoking habits go? Chapabu had turned me into a gentleman! I couldn't believe my own ears.

After a round of snacks, Haque Shaheb told us that he already had a couple of other proposals to consider – from the army, from a recent return from London, even some locals. I thought to myself, "Wow. What are you waiting for then?" Outwardly, I sat there, smiling. Chapabu said, "Of course you do. With such a

beautiful and talented daughter, as well as a good family, it's only natural you should get proposals. And that's why I've come with such a wonderful young man."

Later on, I learned that one of proposals was from a classmate of Ameenah's from medical school, Shamsuddin. He also visited 13/4 and the two of them would study together. My crazy grandmother-in-law would send a glass of their own cow's milk for Shamsuddin. Even so, Shamsuddin merely drank the milk and left, while I got to marry Ameenah and bring her home.

Meanwhile, neither party was willing to back down. I said nothing, and no one asked me anything. Chapabu then wanted to meet Ameenah. Looks were passed between the others and Haque Shaheb said, "My daughter went to visit her Chacha in Chittagong this morning." We were shocked! Why were they hiding the girl? Bu, however, was not one to be put off so easily: "But she was here just yesterday." Again, Haque Shaheb said, "She left today."

"When will she return?"

"She will be there for about two weeks."

Very firmly, Bu said, "My brother has taken one month's leave. He will get married and return with his wife."

They said, "That's impossible. We need time to make the arrangements. We have to prepare our daughter."

Finally, they said, "We may discuss the matter now. But we will have to visit the boy's home in Jessore. His family also needs to visit us. They have to see the girl. There is still much to think about as well as discuss the demands."

I had already told Chapabu that I wanted nothing from them and Bu relayed that information nicely. Haque Shaheb, however, wouldn't budge. Still he said, "A wedding is a wedding. There is much to do and prepare."

After quite a bit of argument, Chapabu ended up inviting them to her home. They said, "Why the hurry? We will certainly visit but we will take our time." They exchanged numbers, promising to continue the conversation over the phone. So, when Khokon arrived with the car, we saw no reason to linger.

Chapabu returned home and exploded with the news. Bhai Shaheb was least concerned, but the rest of the family were extremely happy.

The next morning, I took the flight to Jessore. There, I told Boro Bhai everything. He said, "Oh, so that's why you ran away when I asked you to meet the Ansar Adjutant's daughter? Ok. Let me see what I can do."

My parents, brothers and sisters were excited at the news. Ma smirked constantly – as if her son had done something great.

I received a letter from Chapabu – there was no chance of a wedding before three months. Immediately, I shot off a reply – I would have no leave in the next year, and even if everyone agreed, I wouldn't be able to come. If we didn't get married now, it would have to happen the following year in January. Mejho Bhai had visited Dhanmondi in the meantime but didn't have a chance to meet the girl.

Discussions continued through letters. Ameenah had an uncle who was the manager of Star Jute Mills, Rahman Shaheb. A large, jovial man, he was on very intimate terms with my younger brother, Mintu. So Mintu also tried to gather some information through him and telling him about me four times over. A game was being played by both parties.

I stayed in Jessore for a few days, visiting relatives. I also took a trip to my father's hometown in Deyapara. I rented a pickup from the Jessore Army Cantonment so I could move about freely. My Chchoto Chacha was very happy with this arrangement. Usually he was not pleased to have visitors as he was afraid someone may want a share of his property or fruits! So he was always wary. Mejho Chacha had, at one time, built himself a house and a garden in Deyapara. He would sit by the river to write and sing songs. But Chchoto Chacha had his home thoroughly burgled one night, so Mejho Chacha left Deyapara for good. That Chchoto Chacha was happy to see me and showed me around. Amin Bhai was still the same – an autistic patient, his life was hell. He would never be healthy. Who knew how long he would live like this?

I went to Khulna to Boro Bhai's home and paid a visit to Kamal. He said nothing about a wedding, so I didn't raise the subject either, leaving after some casual talk. I feel at peace when I visit Mejho Chacha – Khadki was a relatively desolate area. Train tracks passed by a huge field and his home, pond, and garden were established on the other side. He ate simply. If I visited in the evening, I would be given puffed rice, with a piece of jiggery, half an inch thick. I eat this with great relish. I chat with him as we wander around the garden. He would pick leaves here and there, some to eat, some to smell. If he sang, I praised him highly, and he would launch into song again, swaying his head in rhythm. When the sun went down, he would say his prayers, with me alongside. Then I would walk to Kazipara to meet my Shejho Chacha. His son, Tara Bhai, never finished college, and his younger son, Fakhru, was born much later, a beautiful child. My cousin sisters had pretty names: Shajubu, Juthibu, Chapabu, Bokulbu, Bulubu, Jyotsna, and Jharna.

Boro Bhai continued the conversation about the wedding. He had a phone and so did Haque Shaheb, so news could be exchanged. Good progress had been made and I returned to Dhaka to Chapabu's. To help my readers get a picture of this house, let me share a small incident: when Yahya Khan came to Dhaka before the start of the Liberation War, my Shejho Chachi asked her son, Tara Bhai, "Oh Tara, that man who is coming, where will he stay?" Tara Bhai replied instantly, "Why? At Chapabu's house, of course." In other words, no matter who came to Dhaka, they all stayed at Chapabu's – she always had room for everyone.

I called my future mother-in-law from Chapabu's house, and then went to visit with her. When I entered the drawing room there, it looked like a meeting room to me. So many people! I found out after introductions that they were all Ameenah's relatives. Among them were, my future father-in-law's two brothers, his wife's sister's husband (father of Brigadier Anwarul Azim and father-in-law of Attorney General Mahbubey Alam) and one of Ameenah's paternal aunt's husbands. There were others as well. Ameenah's friend, Sophie, was there too. There was also a domineering woman who caught my attention. She was the wife of Squadron Leader Abbas who had died in an air crash. His younger brother, Mozammel, was in the army. Mrs. Abbas had been teaching at Loreto School in Shillong for a while. Ameenah, her sisters Taheerah and Ameerah, also studied there with her daughter. So she was very close to the Haque family.

After the introductions, the question-answer round began. I had set myself up for this interview but I had no idea what to expect. The questions came pouring in! How could anyone even come up with so many questions? Well, Enamul Huq could: he asked my name, address, home, family, brothers, sisters, parents, where I lived in Pakistan, what I did, where did I graduate from, etc. This went on for a while, then we had a snack break. I learned later that this house was famous for its snacks but, as instructed by Chapabu, I took only a little on to my plate.

Someone had brought Ameenah into the room in the meantime. She was asked to play the piano for me, which she duly did. I listened and liked what I heard. But the piano wasn't my concern at all. All I could think of was the wedding. And so, I looked at her as I would at a potential bride – and I liked what I saw. But she didn't sit there for too long. Soon, she got up and went inside.

Again, as instructed by Chapabu, I invited them to her house at 47 Purana Paltan, Dhaka. They accepted. But a few others might be joining them for dinner. We called to invite our brother-in-law, Mustafa Sarwar and Shiribu as well. The next day, my future father-in-law arrived with his two brothers in his jeep and an Austin. But, disappointed, I saw that Ameenah had not accompanied them. A little later, Khokon took me to his father's room and called Dhanmondi. After a bit of chitchat, he handed the phone to me, "Here!" Ameenah was on the other end. I asked, "You didn't come?" She only laughed – oh, how much could she laugh?! Not a word. So I had to speak, with very little from her end. She simply laughed at everything. Finally, I hung up. An unsatisfied Khokon queried, "What, mama? Why did you hang up? I didn't hear anything interesting!"

"What does that mean?"

Khokon said, "You should have said 'I love you'."

"Really? Why else do you think I've come this far? Is it necessary to say everything? It can be felt."

Khokon pursed his lips and said, "You're lucky that you're getting married!"

Meanwhile, in the drawing room, someone from my side was waxing eloquent about my qualities while someone from Ameenah's side was describing hers – almost like rural poets sparring. My appearance put an end to that song, though. Then began inquiries about our family and relatives. Chapabu was enough to handle such questions on my behalf, supported, of course, by Mustafa Sarwar DulaBhai, though he was rather unpredictable. This part of the event ended with dinner. Then, as they left, I was invited to visit 13/4A for lunch the next day - alone.

The next day, before I left for Dhanmondi, Chapabu instructed me: don't eat too much. They will cook a lot – after all, they're from West Bengal. So, be careful. Khokon gave me some advice too – "Keep some money in your pocket. After lunch, invite the three sisters to the cinema and say you're going to Madhumita Cinema Hall. You've seen that Hall, right?"

I said, "No."

Khokon gave me the address and Chapabu ordered the driver to drop me off in Dhanmondi. There, I noticed that Sophie, Ameenah's friend, was there too (Sophie now lives in the US and I'm still in touch with her. She has a home there and two daughters).

When lunch was served, I sat down to eat with my future father-in-law, his three daughters, and Sophie. Accordingly, I ate little and everyone tried to persuade me to take more but I wouldn't stray from Bu's instructions. After lunch, we sat together again, but my future father-in-law's presence hindered the conversation and he appeared quite oblivious. Soon he was summoned indoors. He smiled, got up, and left, leaving us now to talk freely. They asked what movies I watched in Lahore and what theaters there were. I told them about the city and we talked of Dhaka too. I had already announced that we'd be going to the cinema for the three o'clock show. As the time drew closer, they all went inside – perhaps to freshen up. Going to the cinema entailed fresh make-up and fancy outfits, after all! We set out on time – I sat in the passenger's seat while the four of them sat in the backseat. The Madhumita Cinema Hall was grand. I had only seen the Gulistan Cinema Hall before and that was huge but this was not far behind. I let the car go. Ameenah sat next to me inside the theater. I gathered up my courage and made several attempts to hold her hand, but each time, she moved her hand away. I knew she was young and inexperienced. How troublesome! I also realized I was a novice too, and felt embarrassed. The movie ended and we exited the hall. I called a baby taxi for them and then got into another one alone, but before we went out way, Taheerah and Ameerah managed to wrangle a promise out of me to treat them to Chinese lunch the next day. By the time I returned to Purana Paltan, Chapabu and Bhai Shaheb had already had their evening tea. Chapabu took me aside and asked me detailed questions about everything. Of course, I couldn't tell her everything, so I said, "I ate at their house, and then saw a movie with them before coming home." Then I said, "Bu, I'm starving!"

Bu laughed and gave me something to eat.

The next day, we went for lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Dhanmondi, close Ameenah's house. Then I returned to Purana Paltan to hear that Boro Bhai had called to say that the marriage had been settled. They had agreed to my demand – we were to be married in January of '69. Khokon dropped me off at the airport the next day and I flew back to Lahore.

Chapter Nine

From Kasur to Quetta

I went to the mess as soon as I arrived in Lahore. I had intentionally come two days early so I could get some rest and refresh my mind. I have never stayed till the last day of my leave and returned to work. This was a lesson I learned from my father. Two days later, I went to my Unit to begin work. I was the Adjutant, so I did the related duties there, but I also worked on Kasur. Mohsin had been working very hard. He was good at his job. He was not an engineer, but he had taken some courses. The retired garrison officer was still there and so were a few of the others. The work on the Kasur tunnel and fortress was long and hard, so it was taking a bit of time. Work had begun on all the observation posts and it would be completed before the rainy season – even though they did not actually have a rainy season, they still referred to that season as such. I noticed that, recently, the officers, especially Mazhar, were looking at me askance. So I asked him one day, "What's going on? Why do you look at me that way? What do you see?"

That large-bodied simple man laughed and told me directly that Jahangir had told them all about my antics at the Lahore Engineering College and University. I was apparently a daring man. A bandit. I liked fights and my fists were my weapons, a street fighter. In fact, I had been seen in different activities involving knives and swords. I had been so powerful and here I was, being a docile officer, a blue-eyed boy to the GOC and the Core Commander.

After listening to this, I said, "Mazhar, you're exaggerating. There is truth in only one or two of the things you described. I had filed a case with the High Court against the University for withholding my result and they thought I was against Ayub Khan, against Kalabagh, the VC, and the Registrar. If that were true, how did I win the case?"

The truth is, there will always be someone who will spread rumors and those who like to hear them. This is the subject of their conversation. And if the person in question happened to be trying to do well, every effort was made to pull him down. I ignored all this and, as was my routine, woke up at five and went to bed at midnight or one. I exercised when I rode my bike two miles each way to work from the mess and back.

Some rumors about me from Risalpur had reached here. One day, Mazhar enquired, "Hey, is it true that your face was on all the Wanted posters?"

"Will you stop this, Mazhar?" I snapped. "I guess you enjoy rumors like these. And yet, you haven't completed the task I or the CO set you. You are worthless when it comes to work and king for stories!"

He then responded, "You know, Shahid, this battalion and several others know that you are a hound. You do everything in the CO's name, so no one dares ask the CO about it."

I replied, "Do you think it is possible for me to continue using the CO's name? It isn't. I only delegate the work to you as he instructs me to. And then I just follow up. That is my fault. You guys won't study, won't find anything out about the army, you won't know who's on leave or who's not. And you find fault with me because I do? Do you even know that there are sipahis in your company who haven't taken leave for the last 10-12 years?"

Mazhar said, "They are all being tried for murder."

I said, “If I ever hear anything like this about me again, you’ll see what happens.”

Instantly, Mazhar responded, “See – you just threatened me! That’s why your name is ‘Bulldog.’” He got up and left right after this comment. It wasn’t possible to do anything good for this world, it seemed – or anything bad, for that matter! Join the army, stay happy, keep others satisfied, use your glib tongue to pass your exams and be promoted, attend the staff college if you can, get lots of promotions without lifting a finger, and become a CNC one day. And if you actually do anything, you’ll one day simply become a fallen leaf from the tree that is the army.

My CO, however, continued to be satisfied with my work. After writing my ACR, he said, “We will use a grading system from now on. I’ve given you an “Above Average” rating. You actually deserve an “Outstanding” but that may hurt you more than do any good.”

In other words, he had revealed a confidential report to me, telling me I had done well. I had nothing to say to this, so I simply thanked him and left.

I began to receive letters from Ameenah – all in English. Aromatic flower petals were folded into the letters. I read the letters and replied to them with great zeal.

Major Sadek came along one day. He had been in the Core of Engineering, but was now in the Infantry. He wanted to build a basketball court for his battalion and needed some cement. After much effort, Major Sadek got a slip for fifty bags of cement which he set out to collect from three or four different places. I learned about this much later when he invited me to the opening ceremony. I was pleasantly surprised to see the beautiful court. Sadek said, “I got all the cement from you, but not from one place. I had to collect it from different places.”

I learned a lesson that day.

The work at Kasur was complete. No one had thought it possible to finish so quickly. My battalion and I were highly praised, and I’m sure, the CO was pleased too. Even in the midst of all this, Imtiaz Azim had summoned me as he did three or six months later. I flew to Pindi first and then to Peshawar. He drove me to his mess in his own car, was very hospitable, took me to the club, and to Qissa Khawani Bazaar where we ate kababs. We didn’t go anywhere else as there was not much time. It’s sad that even though I had lived in Pakistan, I could not see much of the country. In fact, I had never once been to Karachi.

Once the work at Kasur was over and handed over to the Brigade of the Division in which it was located, I marked out the map for Division Eleven. That map would be sent to two other divisions before going to the Brigade Headquarters. The GE (Garrison Engineer) explained all the drawings while the plans as built were drawn. So everyone was duly satisfied.

I received notice for my Junior Technical Course (JTC) and I would have to leave for Quetta. It was a long flight from Lahore to Quetta but the plane was a small one. Before leaving, I reminded the CO that I was getting married the next year (1969) on January 2.

I arrived at Quetta where the plane landed six thousand feet above sea level, but because of the height, it had to taxi for a while. Later on, I learned that Quetta had the longest runway. There were mountains all around and Quetta sat in their midst like a bowl. I went to the mess as our classes were to begin two days later. I met Mowla Bhai at the mess. He had got married to someone of his own choosing. Nilu bhabi had

come to Lahore just once, on tour from her university. The singer, Anjuman Ara, was with her. They came to our hostel where Anjuman Ara was requested to sing, but she said her throat was hurting. In a nasal voice, she sang a line and said, “This is how I will sound,” and a roll of laughter rippled through the crowd.

Classes began and I discovered that the directing officer was a Major. His hair had an odd hue, he was short, and I didn’t quite like his attitude because, on the very first day, he selected a junior to be the Class Senior and Leader. I protested, “How is this possible?” He replied, “It’s possible.” So what could I do? But within a couple of days, I figured out that this course in Quetta would be troublesome. So I prepared myself mentally and attended all my classes. We had a weaponry class as well as a hurdles class (a PT class, in short). There were many practical activities – exercises and going out. We had classes during the day, and sometimes, even at night. On Sundays, the Bangalis met either at someone’s home or the mess. I would also meet Kala Mahmud.

Then I met Jalil Bhai. Major Jalil was also a directing staff and he expressed regret at why he hadn’t got me earlier. Had I been with him, he would have shown me what’s what! Mowla Bhai took me to Iqbal Ali’s home. He was an EME officer and he had been posted there. He was quite good. He had also recently got married and arrived here from East Pakistan. He lived in a two-bedroom apartment with his wife, Milly. In the course of our conversation, we discovered that Milly was my niece – she was the granddaughter of my mother’s first cousin. Milly was very young and I was shocked that Iqbal Ali had married her.

One Sunday, I went to the club – a good place, quite well-known. The club belonged to the British who had a stronghold in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. Many of the laws from the British period were still followed here. The main attraction at the club was billiards, while some came to drink. I played billiards a couple of times.

In the meantime, I received a letter from Boro Bhai. His main message – there was a problem with the wedding…

Chapter Ten

The Wedding

After reading Boro Bhai's letter, I stopped writing to Ameenah in Dhaka. I thought about it for a few days. Ameenah was ill and that's why the marriage had been called off – but what if she had become ill after our marriage? What would I have done then? I found the answer within myself and sent a reply to my brother – this wedding will take place. I also sent a letter to Dhaka informing them that my courses would be completed in December and I would arrive as scheduled. I also applied for a month's leave with the CO in Lahore, but there was no response from him. I was determined – I would work hard and give my best, but I should not be taken for granted. If I didn't get leave, I would resign. I was an engineer – there would be no dearth of jobs for me. I remembered what Mannan Bhai had said about this: "Listen, Shantu, you are going to Army to become an engineer of which I have no doubt. You will also get entry into the Army. Work there for about seven years or as long as you wish, then retire. You will be an engineer and you can achieve anything you want. And look at us. What will happen to us? If I lose my job, I'll have to go into retirement immediately. I don't have the option of doing anything else."

The three-month short course was almost over (it was usually a six-month course). When the course ended, four of us were asked to present the subject of matter to a large audience comprising all the officers and commanders. I was quite good, but in hindsight, I felt like I could have done better. A Pathan boy from the Infantry became first Ax, the second Ax was given to Gazanafor Azam from the Core of Engineering. I received a B+ and OI+. Later, Major Jalil said that one man from the Infantry had to be awarded, and so the man who came third was given the position. And yet, Azam had been first and I second. Azam later became my student.

The course came to an end and the date of my wedding drew closer. I sent a telegram to let everyone know and then went to Lahore to inform my CO of my wedding on the 2nd. I asked, "Sir, what about my leave?" He replied, "Doesn't matter when you go, you get leave for seven days. There's a lot to do here."

I never beg anyone for anything, unless absolutely necessary. So I took my seven-day leave, confirmed my ticket, and went to the airport the next day. At the airport, I bumped into Kamal Lasker Shaheb who would also be traveling to Dhaka on the same flight. Just before the plane landed, I decided to invite him to my wedding. We alighted and were about to enter the Tejgaon Airport terminal when suddenly Kamal Lasker burst out in laughter. Apparently, he was getting married too – on the 5th and that too, in Dhaka! I invited him to my wedding again then. Khokon was waiting outside the terminal with a car. I asked, "So, Khokon, is the wedding on?" He said, "What a hullabaloo! The bamboo poles are in place – of course, the wedding is on!" He continued, "The wedding began here a month ago! Singing-dancing, parodies, decorations, jewelry, and a house full of women! Seems like all the girls in Dhaka are in that house – you'll be so confused!"

I arrived at Dhanmondi 13/4 but I was not confused. I met my future in-laws and learned that my future grandmother-in-law had recently passed away in Chittagong at her middle son, Dr. Ataul Haque's home. I expressed my condolences accordingly. Once I was seated in the drawing room, my future mother-in-law, accompanied by others, came in and placed a ring on my finger. Different kinds of snacks were served as people came and went, asking how I was doing.

I went to Purana Paltan after this, rested a little, then caught the last flight to Jessore. At home, I found Boro Bhai raging – because there was no news from me. His accusation: "Here we are, all going crazy with the arrangements, and we don't even know if you arrived!"

"But I informed you about it from Quetta," was my response. That silenced him.

That night, he took me to a barber – "Does anyone get married in a mustache?"

I had to grin and bear it – my beloved mustache was shaved clean. That was marriage – the groom had to be complacent, bound to listen to everyone.

The next day, I was seated on a low wooden stool and the turmeric ceremony or *gaye holud* began. My first cousin, sister-in-law, and the neighborhood girls arrived, the sight of whom delighted me. I thought, "See, the Jessore girls like me! But I'm not sorry that I'm not getting married in Jessore."

There was a lot of rubbing and shoving as the turmeric was applied. I accepted it all in silence, and like an obedient son, finished the ceremony with the ritual bath. I stood up – and my lungi fell. Instantly, the girls disappeared, running in whichever direction they could. I had actually done this on purpose – as revenge for the torture I had undergone. Of course, I had my underwear on, but no one waited to see that.

Abba had been a little quiet but Ma was comparatively excited. Mintu was away in England completing a course, but my other siblings were present. And Hasnu was at my in-laws in Dhanmondi. She had been there for the last few days. Later that day, Boro Bhai, Ma, Mejho Bhai and I set off for Dhaka. I was not too happy about leaving Hasan, Moin, and Rekha behind, but Boro Bhai was in charge, so I had nothing to say.

In Dhaka, Ma and I stayed at Chapabu's, although she was abroad at the time. Boro Bhai was out, inviting people, making arrangements for transport, etc. I had invited my school friend, Kabir Hossain Bablu. He and I had attended Muslim Academy and MM College. He had been doing well as a bank officer but he left that to become a businessman. He later died in the Chittagong-Dhaka F28 plane crash. Kamal Lasker was supposed to come and I had invited Col. Butt who had been my CO in Murree. He was now the CMES Commander in Dhaka. He said he would try to come but on the day of the wedding, I received a beautiful silver tea set from him and a message that he couldn't come. I did not invite anyone else from the army.

The 2nd of January dawned. Some of the wedding responsibilities were taken over by Barrister Rafiqul Haque in place of Chapabu. And Khokon was a force on his own. Bhai Shaheb was silent as usual as was Henu (Barrister Rafiqul's wife), a serious doctor. People came and went the whole day until it was time to gather for the wedding party. Ma smiled constantly – in other words, she was very happy. She was everything to me.

In the evening, I was dressed up in a pair of *nagras*, slim pajama pants, an off-white top coat, and a turban on my head. Then I was led to a large posh car. K.Q. Huda Bhai came in his car to join the groom's party as did Kabir. Monwar Bhai would also be staying. There was Altaf Mama, very close to our family, though not a relative. I don't know why we addressed him as "mama" but he was very affectionate towards us. He was from Pabna, an engineer, and now posted to Jessore. He was a friend of Boro Bhai's. There were innumerable others as well.

The motorcade set off from 47 Purana Paltan (Boro Bhai had called ahead to Dhanmondi to let them know we had headed out). We progressed slowly towards Dhanmondi and soon entered Road No. 2, arriving at the bridge over the lake. I turned to my right to see the house glittering with fairy lights. They had really dressed up the entire house.

The car in which I rode had also been well-decorated. We drove at a snail's pace to gradually arrive at the gate, which was barricaded by a large bunch of kids from my in-laws' side. My father-in-law had a lot of sisters – their children, along with the children of other relatives (some from India, the rest from here), innumerable friends of Ameenah, Taheerah, and Ameerah, had crowded here, guarding the gate. So, it was quite impossible to break down the gates. They wanted an entry fee of five hundred taka. After much bargaining and verbal fights, Rafiq Mama managed to get in to the other side. Khokon stayed with me. He had five hundred taka in his pocket in change. At one point, he threw the change out amongst them. So while the children scrambled to gather the money, Khokon quickly escorted me indoors. A stage had been set up in the open space in front of the house and this is where I sat. On one side sat Kamal, and on the other was Bablu. Even so, I couldn't get away from being bothered by the children. I believe they had decided already that they wouldn't let their one and only DulaBhai sit in peace. Someone placed a handkerchief in my hand and told me to cover my mouth with it. Apparently, without this handkerchief over my mouth, I didn't look like a proper groom! So I did as instructed. Unfortunately, word had already spread that I no longer sported my special mustache and that became a point of sorrow for the ladies.

The Kazi or priest arrived and the wedding vows were duly taken. Ameenah was then escorted out. The divine beauty, Ameenah, dressed up in the sari and jewelry I had sent, was now my wife! I couldn't believe it yet. I don't know if anyone spoke of their wife's beauty in such terms but beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.

I just remembered a story in this regard. My paternal grandfather had married a Bangali girl from Shundorpur. Prior to this, marriages would take place between close or distant relatives. My Dada was the first to marry outside of his clan and he discarded the traditional garb of his ancestors to don the Bangali outfit of the dhoti, fatua, sandals on his feet, and books under his arm. His sole work was to lie on a rush mat by the Bhoirob River under the carambola tree, writing books on the paper he had bought from Calcutta with the ink he had made himself. He knew many languages – Persian, Bangla, English, and Arabic - but his chosen one was Bangla. He had written over a hundred books but they were never published. Only recently, I had two of them scanned and printed. So, when that Dada brought a wife, his nephew asked, "Chacha, what is this you have married?" And Dada replied, "Take my eyes and look through them. Only then you'll see the beauty."

And I had seen Ameenah's beauty through my own eyes.

It was time for the ceremonial juice drinks. Ameenah lifted the glass to my lips and I did the same for her. As I took my turn, I also gave her a poke at which she became rather surprised. Then it was time to eat. The food was really tasty – after all, it was wedding food! Everyone began to leave after this. Ameenah and I were told to go out for a drive. Everything had been planned, and so the two of us went out with the chauffeur driving. I think we drove up to Gulshan, which was still quite underdeveloped. It was rather desolate, with few houses and empty streets. I believe we had a time limit – one hour – and the chauffeur drove around as instructed. I asked Ameenah a couple of questions, spoke about myself, but she only

laughed. She responded to a few of the things I said and then it was time to return to Dhanmondi. Now her friends demanded that I was to pick her up in my arms and take her to the wedding bedroom. I complied and everyone enjoyed the spectacle. I guess everyone in a wedding has a great deal of fun, except the bride and groom. I had read about this "wedding bedroom" in books and from experienced friends, but once I entered, I couldn't imagine how I would cross this treacherous bridge. Not knowing what to do, I went into the bathroom and took my time changing. When I came out, I found Ameenah curled up in the blanket, sleeping. There was no point in my staying awake, so I too went to sleep. That was the end of our wedding night. In the morning, Ameenah acted as though there was nothing between us and went inside to her parents' room. I got dressed after a little while and had my breakfast. As I sat around, Boro Bhai arrived with a couple of others. It was time for us to go to Jessore. Everything was almost ready. Hands were shaken, a few tears were shed, and then we set off, Ameenah accompanied by little Ameerah.

We were greeted at the Jessore Airport by everyone, including my siblings. Altaf Mama had decorated his car for the occasion. Abba came down the stairs to meet us as soon as we arrived home. He took Ameenah's hand and led her inside. Ma had come with us. The large southwestern room had been readied for us with a bed, a dressing table, sofas and a few chairs. People began to arrive as is usual at a house where a wedding has just taken place. That's when I learned that Abba had visited Enamul Huq Shaheb earlier. He had met his future daughter-in-law and given her a ring. When he had gone to rest after eating, he had taken Ameenah in with him and read to her from his book "Parting Words to Posterity." She had been asked to read to him as well. Mejho Chacha had gone with Abba and he had been introduced as the most important elder. He had been told that twenty-five thousand taka was a little steep for the den mohor[49]. The only word he heard was "steep" and he had immediately protested, "My nephew is an engineer, working in the army. He has great value. You must increase the amount to thirty thousand taka."

Just as the wedding was a beautiful affair, so was the reception. Many people joined in the festivities and much food was cooked in large pots over open fires. A 10-man Baluch band, sent by my friend Javed, played at the event.

The next morning, we went to Dhaka.

[49] The payment promised to the bride by the groom upon marriage to provide her with economic security and protect against arbitrary divorce.

Chapter Eleven

Married Life

I had called ahead to my Commanding Officer (CO), Akhtar Daad, and Major Akhter Bhai of my arrival in Lahore on January 7 with Ameenah. When we arrived, I found Akhtar Daad waiting for us with a bouquet and Major Akhter with a car. The Subedar Major had also come to receive us in an on-payment car. We decided to stay at Akhtar Daad's home for the time being. Akhtar Daad's father, Brigradier Sabdaad, and his mother had come to visit from Khadiya. I cannot describe the level of affection with which they welcomed us in. The Subedar Major did, however, inform me that my house was ready as well. Brigadier Sabdaad sat to eat with us all and we had a great time chatting. The guest bedroom had been set up as a honeymoon suite. A plate of *laddoo* and glasses were served there after which everyone bade us goodnight.

We stayed here for two days before moving into our own designated house. I had nothing, but the CO sent us everything we needed from the Unit. He even sent us a piano because he knew Ameenah could play!

One day, Ameenah asked, "Where is the car I saw in that picture of yours?" I replied, "I sold it to marry you!" And, as usual, she burst into laughter.

I had no idea that banks lent money. I only knew that I had to pick up my salary from there. In fact, I found, I could take a one-month advance on my salary from there. I was thinking of saving up to buy a car. In the meantime, several months went by. I asked Ameenah several times, "Do you want anything?" She didn't. She hadn't wanted anything when I asked her on the plane; she didn't want anything now either. The only thing she said was, "I want to go to Dhaka."

Then one day, she said she wanted a bodna[50]. That's right! I didn't have a bodna nor was there any toilet paper. So, that very day, I bought a bodna from the office canteen. This was tied to the handlebar of my bicycle by my runner. As I cycled home, I laughed to myself at the sight. When Anwarul Haque had come to Lahore Engineering, he had carried a bodna tied to his bedding all the way from Madaripur. And I had had to suffer gravely for laughing at him – and today, like a hero, I was riding home with the same thing adorning my bike! It didn't seem very polite, though, to be presenting my new bride with a bodna, so I decided to leave it where it was and let my batman place it in the bathroom when he could.

One day, three or four of Ameenah's friends came to visit. They were part of Lahore's elite. One of them, a Pakistani, had been in Dhaka. These friends saw how Ameenah was living but that didn't bother me or her in any way. We realized we needed some knives and cutlery, so we went shopping to Biden Road where we spotted a store with pictures of the items we needed. I entered the shop and asked the Punjabi owner to show me what he had. Very politely, he replied that he did not sell such things. "Then what do you sell?" After much persuasion, he said that he performed circumcisions. "Then why do you have pictures of knives, spoons, and forks on your signboard?" I stormed. Calmly, the man asked, "Then should I put a picture of that thing up there?"

[50] A water-pot with a spout typically used in Bangladesh to clean up after using the toilet.

We couldn't buy the utensils that day but we learned later that they were sold on Macleod Road. I had shown Ameenah around that road. It was a very old market with multiple restaurants, cinema theaters and shops.

We were getting along quite well although it was rather cold. The weather became quite intolerable for Ameenah. She would remain curled up under heavy blankets, but at least we had a heater. Ameenah had begun to whine about going to Dhaka now. So finally, I bought a ticket for her only to come home and hear that she was pregnant! I had no idea about the appropriate reaction to such news but I was truly very happy. Now I had no excuse to stop her going home, so three days later, she left for Dhaka. I sent a telegram to Dhaka notifying them of her arrival, and from February, after her departure, I set to work with double the concentration.

A few days later we had our internal emplacement training where something else happened. Usually, during emplacements, trenches were constructed in all directions. This was a defense demo observed by the Core Commander, the GOCs, and the Brigade Commander. After the training, there was the debriefing as usual. The Core Commander said, "See?" Silence. He continued, "War is war. It is always unpredictable. You have determined by logic the first, second, and third move but the enemy have thought of the same and planned a fourth move. That's the path they'll take. You've fixed them in the emplacement, and not left them free."

The discussions about the Kasur Fortress reduced as the work drew towards completion.

One night, I received a call from Gulbaag police station. A driver was caught stealing and selling fuel. He was in jail. I said, "Let him be. I'm sending someone for him. He will be court-martialled by the army." The next morning I reported the incident to Major Habibullah, the OC of 85 Field Company. He responded, "Okay." When the CO arrived and learned of the incident, he said, "Call Habibullah." A little later, Habibullah came out of the CO's office and into mine. He burst out in laughter, eventually falling onto the carpet. When he calmed down and sat on a chair, I asked, "Sir, what happened?" He said, "The CO said he has taken action. He has assigned the driver and the Company Imam to the Quarter Guard." I was shocked. "Sir, why the poor priest been sent to the Quarter Guard?" He said, "The Imam failed to guide the driver properly which is why he became a thief. That's why!"

The next morning, we heard that when he was released, the Imam had run away in the dark of night! The Imam was Bangali as was the Cook, and that too from the south. These southerners would get into trouble, perhaps murder, and run away to the ships. There, in the galleys, they would cut onions and potatoes, waiting for their hair and beards to grow, before going up on deck to become the Imam. They read a couple of books or did some kitchen work and became chefs. A couple of years later, they would come ashore in Karachi and get employed as Imams or Cooks.

In May, my mother-in-law arrived in Lahore with Ameenah. The reason was that having become too busy with work after her departure, I had not written to her as often. This had driven my in-laws to worry. I was happy to have them here and went to receive them at the airport. My mother-in-law soon grew uncomfortable in the Lahore heat. We sat outside during the day before it got dark and sometimes went sightseeing. The quality of our food improved from my mother-in-law's presence and I began to find all varieties of food on my plate. Ameenah was pregnant but her appetite declined and she was losing weight. So I took her to Dr. A. R. Khan. He was a doctor in the army, a Colonel, a wonderful person and a good

doctor. He took great care of his patients. I knew him from before, so I took my mother-in-law and Ameenah to his house. Col. Khan examined Ameenah but made no comment. We ate and chatted for a while. Then he took me aside and said, "Take care of her. Keep her happy and everything should be okay." His words worried me a little. I didn't know how to take care of others and it would be hard for me. On top of that, the workload was such that I didn't even know how my days passed. How would I spare time for Ameenah? I tried my best – telling her my best jokes. Some worked, some didn't, so I tried being naughty and kept her laughing.

The pressure at work had increased. I woke up at five and had to be at the CO's house for orders by six. And then I had to be at work by eight with no idea when I would return. I would borrow money to take a taxi to Mall Road or Anarkali when we felt like it. But as the doctor had advised, I also tried to come home by late afternoon. Sometimes, we would take a taxi to visit Brigradier Sabdaad, or Major Akhtar. One Sunday we went to the Shalimar Gardens and on another Sunday, we visited the fort and the Shahi Mosque. Finally, we visited the Empress Nurjahan and her daughter's graves which lay neglected under weeds by the rail tracks. They had been carelessly paved and had something written in stone. The area wasn't even marked out. It was only possible to see the graves if one knew of their existence or location.

In 1969, I bought a second-hand '65 Volkswagon with the number plate BN-3 and presented it to Ameenah: "This is your birthday present" (her birthday being on May 29). She laughed when she heard this. Perhaps this was the second present I had given her after the bodna. But she was happy to receive the car. We would be invited to Brig. Sabdaad's home where we had a chance to chat and spend some good times. Brig. Sabdaad heard from my mother-in-law that they lived in a house in front of the EPR opposite a lake and we were regaled with stories of the EPR by him. He had been in the EPR and it was he who had upgraded it to a brigade. He was the first Brigadier at the EPR, formerly known as Eastern Frontier Rifles. He also talked to us about his childhood days in Dhaka, what it was like in the first days of independent Bangladesh, Ayub Khan and his dictatorship. When Ayub Khan came to Dhaka in '62, the Brigadier had caught him alone for a moment and said, "Sir, if we continue to live and work as we are doing now, perhaps one day, East Pakistan will no longer be ours. We might have to lose it." Ayub Khan had replied, "What do *you* know? It was I who was here, was the GOC here. I know every bone of these vile Bangalis. They can't possibly do any such thing. Just look out for yourself." Brigadier Sabdaad had then responded, "Sir, they burnt your effigy today" to which Ayub Khan said, "Oh, that's nothing. Such a minor issue. These things happen done by lowly villains."

Temperatures rose and my mother-in-law informed me that it was necessary for a woman to be with Ameenah constantly. So I hired a Pathan woman and my mother-in-law explained the duties to her. She also instructed my batman, Hakim, before finally returning to Dhaka.

We became lonely again as soon as my mother-in-law left because she had kept the house lively. It felt empty now. A few days later, Captain Kamal Lasker arrived with his wife and mother. He had been posted to Lahore at the Inspectorate Directorate, but hadn't yet got a place to stay. So they would be staying with us for the time being. I was inwardly quite happy about this. This was my first time meeting his wife – a friendly, polite, educated woman. She was also a good cook. She would fry eggs and *paratha* for her mother-in-law, and we would often get a share of that. We ate together because I had a rule in my house – any visitor, no matter how long they stayed, ate at my table.

We went out on Sundays if we had time, but in the mornings, I just had to go to Akhtar Daad's gymkhana. We played billiards there and listened to the police band when they practiced their pipes. It was delightful. The lunch there was very good and cheap too.

I began to notice that the people of West Pakistan were growing more religious. Madrasahs were mushrooming and money was pouring in from the Middle East. And on the other side, East Pakistan was being looted. West Pakistan was also growing politically heated. Mr. Bhutto was creating a stir with his incendiary speeches, telling lies. The rich, the landowners, and the big zamindars from Sindh liked him. Ayub Khan liked him as well, making him the foreign minister at the age of 33. And yet, he did not hesitate to oppose Ayub Khan. And on the other side, that is, in East Pakistan, the situation was in turmoil over the Agartala Conspiracy against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and other things. Suleri Shaheb of the *Pakistan Times* was in the habit of fueling conflicts, especially when it came to issues of East Pakistan. He too had a hand in the separation of Pakistan.

Ameenah received some news from Dhaka – Ameerah, her little sister, was going to America to study, and apparently she was planning to travel by ship. How old was Ameerah then? Perhaps seventeen. That was daring idea for a seventeen-year-old. Ameenah must go to Dhaka – but if she went now, she couldn't return till after the baby was born. Ameenah, of course, was eager to go, and only a cruel, hard-hearted person could have said no.

Suddenly, Mintu arrived from England one day, on his way to Dhaka. He wanted to spend a few days with us. This was a lot of fun and we were regaled with stories of England. He had gone to Belfast, trained and sat for his exams at McKee & McKee, coming out on top. Mintu was a very good student. He had also stood first in his matriculation exams. I lent him a car and a driver, telling him to go sightseeing around Lahore.

The day before he left for Dhaka, the two of us sat for a chat. In the course of conversation, we turned to our Jessore home. He wanted to know if I sent Abba money and was surprised to hear that I sent four hundred and fifty taka home every month. How did I, a newly married man, who earned just seven hundred taka send four hundred and fifty home?

It's best to mention here that it was Boro Bhai who determined how much each of us was to send. Even so, he considered the amounts Mintu and I sent to be his contribution! In fact, I have always done what he instructed but he always took credit. But that didn't really bother me.

Ameenah left for Dhaka a few days after Mintu's departure, and I, as usual, absorbed myself in work. I rode to work on my bicycle. I didn't really drive, and if I did, it was not often because petrol was expensive – two taka a gallon.

As the temperatures cool in Pakistan, mangoes are harvested, although not too many. I didn't really like mangoes, but I loved oranges. Pakistan did not grow too many vegetables but that's what they ate mostly. They ate little meat and no fish. I would buy fish once a week for my home – usually the large kind like boal and ayer. This was one advantage for the Bangalis – fish was available and cheap. It was possible to get a smaller boal for one taka.

One day, the phone in my office rang – an unusual occurrence as phone calls were not often made. When I picked up the receiver, I heard someone on the other end shout, "Shontu!" I recognized the voice instantly

– it was Mannan Bhai, Major Mannan. He said, “I’m working on your posting. Did you know I’m in the MS now?” I replied in the negative. “Well, then, you have three choices. Number one, the Military College of Engineering. You can go there as the first Bangali instructor in Risalpur. Secondly – I don’t know if it will happen – you can go to Washington as Third Secretary where you can have a lot of fun. You could buy one or two Vespa cars – or maybe not. At least you might be able to return with a record player or something else. You will live in Washington and meet many Black women. And thirdly, the Military Engineering Service as Assistant Garrison Engineer although I don’t know the location just yet. But, you can make some money there. So, which one do you prefer?”

I asked, “Mannan Bhai, which one do you recommend?”

He said, “You pick first.”

I replied, “I want to go as an instructor.”

He was very happy to hear this. “Good choice. Good for your career. You’ll be the first Bangali MCE instructor – although Majidul Huq served there for a few days but he declared unfit to be an instructor and so he was transferred to the center. But I hope you’ll be able to stick it out.” He hung up.

Chapter Twelve

Instructor of the Military College of Engineering

I was posted to Risalpur. The CO arranged a farewell dinner for me at the Officers' Club where he invited quite a few people including the Brigadiers, Colonels, Lt. Colonels and all the officers of our battalion. It was a wonderful dinner and the CO gave a speech, showering me with praise.

Two days later, I fueled up my Volkswagon and packed it up with my belongings. In fact, my entire household easily fit in. I didn't have any beds, sofas, carpets, or even curtains to take. I never even thought these were necessary for a household. I was about to head out in the morning when the quarter master arrived to check up on the apartment. There was not much to check though – everything was a hundred and fifty years old, some even older! The battalion was over two hundred years old, and so there were items from different eras.

People understand the pain of life, but for some reason, I don't. I am only hurt if someone insults or betrays me. I never felt any pain of hunger and was happy as long as I had clothes to cover me. I'm not affected by others' behavior because it is their responsibility. Sometimes I wonder why I work so hard. Perhaps it was self-respect and the thought that was deep-seated within – let me live and I will make it up to you.

Once, I had pointed to the Adjutant's chair and asked the CO, "Why don't we get a lighter chair?" He asked, "Shahid, have you ever looked on the bottom side of that chair?"

"No, why?"

"Do it and then come to speak with me."

I turned the chair over and saw many signatures and initials. Some had faded with time, some had dates. All the names were English. They were of the names of the West Pakistani officers who came in after '47. I went back to the CO and said, "Sir, no need for another chair." He laughed and said, "You can add your signature there if you wish."

So I added my signature. There were many such ancient pieces in the Three Engineer Battalion – cups, silver. Apparently, officers would often donate some silver to the Battalion when they left.

Three days before leaving for Risalpur, as I packed my books and files, I noticed a Volkswagon, filled to the brim, pull up. It was Major Habibullah's car. He strode into my office and demanded, "Did you know that all the Majors were promoted yesterday? Everyone is now a Lt. Colonel."

I replied, "No, I didn't know that."

He said, "That son of a bitch, Yahya Khan has superseded me."

He grew angrier and refused to sit. After a while, he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. "This is my resignation. Take it!"

I replied, "Sir, I can't do that."

"Oh, really?" saying which he pulled a revolver out of his pocket now and pointed it at my head. "You can't?"

Quickly, I said, “Yes, of course I can!” I took the letter from him and he strode out, got into his car and drove off. What a Pathan! I wiped the sweat off my brow and called the CO at his home. He said, “You don’t have to do anything. I’ll deal with it.”

Later on, I learned that the CO had gone to the Divisional Headquarters and reported the incident to the GOC, who then notified the Army Headquarter. All the checkposts were alerted. Habibullah crossed Pindi and Akora Khattak, passed Nowshera on to his destination. On the way, a truck driver was slow to give him way and so he took out his revolver and shot the tire.

It was the first time I had driven my own car such a distance to Risalpur. On the way, I stopped at Jhelum to have some tea and then set off again. The road became deserted after some time and it was almost two pm when I arrived at Pindi. I knew the area so I went to Silver Grill, a reputed restaurant for some lunch. After this, I got to Nowshera where I had to cross a boat bridge. Past Risalpur was Mardan, the land of tobacco. After Mardan, there was the Swat River on one side and the mountains on the other. Beyond that was Mingora, the capital of Swat.

I arrived at the mess in Risalpur which I had already contacted. Nasir, a good friend, was here. We had been close in Lahore when I was a bachelor. I found his address and went to his residence. The bungalow where he lived was occupied sometimes by families, sometimes by bachelors. Nasir was very happy to see me and helped unload my belongings. He had already set up a room for me and even said how proud he was have me here. He said, “You’re a Bangali and it’s a big achievement for a Bangali to become an instructor in the Military Academy. There are no others like that and so I’m very happy.”

I went to the Military College of Engineering (MCE) in Risalpur the next morning. First, I went to the Commandant’s office. My orders were to report to Senior Instructor Major Faruk Iqbal who I knew from before. The Major shook my hand firmly, sat me down, and said, “What would you like to have?”

I said, “I had breakfast before coming, sir.”

He said, “Then have tea.”

He had his own orderly as well as a kettle. Major Faruk was a methodical man, a well-reputed officer. A well-known student from Hasan Abdal Cadet College, he had missed the 23rd PM Sword of Honor by a margin. He was very fair-skinned, with a reddish face like the Pathans. His hair was parted on the left and he had an army-style mustache.

He said to me, “You’ve been assigned to the Chemical Wing where there is some geometric work and some engineering drawing. We also have all the common courses taken by first year engineering students. But first, let’s have a cup of tea, and then I will take you to the Chief Instructor, Colonel Munir. We call him Professor Munir because he has retired. He has an MS from Germany but no PhD. He has been working at MCE for a long time and many of the younger officers are his students while the older ones are his friends. Yahya Khan was his classmate.” As he said this, he smiled faintly and then added, “Munir Shaheb went up in the world quite a bit after the fall of Ayub when Yahya rose in status, although Munir was already up there – he just went higher.”

My conversation with Faruk Iqbal was in English – not a word of Urdu or Punjabi was spoken.

Col. Munir's office was in the same building on the opposite side. It was a large room and well-decorated. He had been here for a long time, so things had accumulated. He asked me a number of questions and also talked about several things. Then he handed me a sheet of paper and said, "You have to teach these geometrical topics as well as engineering drawing. Make sure you don't have more than two or three classes a week."

MCE teachers were known as Instructors and no one had to take more than three classes though the usual load was two classes. The rest of the time was to be spent in studying, writing précis, and grading. It wasn't much physically, but there was a lot of brain work involved. We returned to Faruk Iqbal's office after finishing up with Col. Munir. Iqbal said, "You'll soon get the hang of things – where the classes are, the roads, the location of the engineering section, and so on. You will be summoned one of these days by the Commandant and that's when you'll be introduced. General Mukim's son-in-law, Brigadier Ershad is here as the Commandant – a very handsome man. He is a full Colonel but he will soon be a Brigadier. We started addressing him as Brigadier already and he doesn't mind at all!"

Faruk Iqbal's laughter was loud and his teeth showed a little more. He loved laughing and everyone in the army knew that I appreciated humor.

Showing me to my office, Faruk Iqbal said, "This is like a workshop. There's not much machinery here but this is where cars are assembled and unassembled. Students learn about cars here."

I was to take over Captain Najib's position as he was transferred elsewhere as a Major. We were introduced and Faruk Iqbal said, "You have to do what Najib has been doing here. He will explain things to you over the next couple of days before he leaves. And Shahid, though we have a policy of 'only the best can come,' we still evaluate them for three months. If they survive, great. If not, they are posted out."

Faruk Iqbal left and I had a chat with Najib, who had a rather somber personality. He was a Senior Captain while I was only a Junior Captain and he made sure I knew it. Later, though, he softened a little and even shared his precis and books over the next couple of days before his departure.

This was the beginning of my life at the Military College of Engineering and my second time at Risalpur. The other time, I had been a student, having stood first in grading and everything else. Those who were a little older remembered me and that's why Col. Munir had been smiling mysteriously. This time, however, I was a married man with a child on the way, so I was quite conscious of myself. I vowed that I would try to do everything even better than before. Mannan Bhai said, "Only you know whether you will stay or go after working here (in the army) for seven years. And if you decide you want to make this your career, then you shouldn't delay. Start today. I've seen all your ACRs, books, results – I think you have a future here."

So I was justifiably enthused. Soldiers were trained at the Center and the area was quite large. There were lots of Bangalis too. Basic courses as well as civil engineering were taught to the officers in engineering at the college. Faruk Iqbal had told me what to teach at the OB (Officers' Basic). He also said, "We don't have enough instructors, so you will need to take more classes. We haven't been able to settle things here after the war." And Prof. Munir told me I'd have to teach Theory of Machines.

Soon, I was summoned by the Commandant Brigadier Ershad. This, however, was not my first meeting with him. We had met previously at some tea where we had shaken hands and chatted briefly. It was usual in the military to maintain that superiority even in social gatherings.

Apart from Brigadier Ershad, Col. Mushtaq, Col. Janjua, Prof. Munir, Prof. Aslam, and a few other seniors were present. Even Major Anis from Lahore was here and it was he who escorted me in to the Commandant's office. The Commandant, a fair-skinned, well-spoken man, and I shook hands. Later, I heard that he was not really a brilliant or bright officer at all. Apparently, he had come this far only because he was General Mukim's son-in-law.

The Commandant explained some things about the Military College Engineering and revealed that he too had been a student here. So he understood how it worked and he continued his efforts to do so. He also said that the quality of an institution depended on its instructors, etc. Then I was dismissed. Everyone was curious to know what the Commandant had said and I told them exactly what had transpired.

The DQ, that is, the Quarter Master, Major Azam, was a Bihari East Pakistani. He had a house in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. Within a few days, I realized what a schemer he was. He called for me to inform me that I was to be given a house. The letter stated the address: 61 North Road, Risalpur.

I went to see the house after classes with a havildar. He unlocked the door and declared that the house had been cleaned. I toured the house with the havildar, but I was neither pleased nor displeased. In the bathroom, in place of the commode was a wooden box with a bowl – that was what I'd have to use. Even though it would be cleaned by a sweeper, it was still a disgusting affair!

This house, about a hundred and fifty years old, was the last one on North Road. It was a single story building but had a height of fourteen feet. It had a fireplace and a few stoves. I could turn on any one of these during the winter. There were five bedrooms, so it was quite a large house. However, I would be sharing the one half with a Major and his wife.

Major Sarwar lived next door. He came forward when he saw me and I did the same. "I'm to become your neighbor!" Hearing us, his wife also appeared from inside the house. Major Sarwar was robust but his wife was doubly so. They were a happy couple and were pleased to see me.

"Welcome! Welcome!" she said. "When is your wife coming?"

I said, "She's pregnant, but she will be here within two or three months after the baby is born."

"So you'll have to live here alone now?"

"I am staying with Captain Nasir at the Center for now, but I'll move here soon."

The Major showed me around his house – filled with expensive furniture, carpets, and curtains. There was an AC fixed to the window and his bed was worth seeing. One had to use a stool to climb up on the bed from either side. I thought about what would happen should the wife climb into bed and the Major climbed on top of her. If they happened to roll over and fall, even if they didn't die, they would break something and be paralyzed for life!

During my time at Risalpur, if I happened to meet Sarwar while I was with Faruk Iqbal, we would burst into laughter. The two of us were finally caught out by our wives and labeled as perverts!

A new Bangali instructor came to the MCE – Captain Mujib. He had stood first in his courses at the PMA and posted here. He was loud but we were the first two Bangali instructors at the Pakistan Military College of Engineering.

Gradually, I began to teach my courses and get to know my students. The lecturer's table had a picture of each student with their names and their seats were assigned, so it was easy to memorize the students' names and their seats within a few days. This made teaching easier and it was possible to have one-to-one contact. I could also call on each by name and look them in the eye. However, I contemplated that what I was teaching or would teach was all in the books and the precis. It was all there before and would continue to be. So what would the students really learn?

What had I learned at Engineering College and University or at Jessore's MM College? As far as I understood, I had learned only until Class Ten. I had history, geography, Bangla, English, Social Studies, Urdu, Arabic, etc. I was able to play sports, sing, recite poetry, act, and dance. The poet Jashimuddin had come to visit as did poet Golam Mustafa. Other celebrities visited as well. And, of course, I had lessons from my father. Abba had taught me how to recite poetry. After Class Nine or Ten, Abba would read the works of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and other famous writers with us. He would discuss them with us and in the course of these talks, we would talk about Homer, the Russian writers, Nazrul, Rabindranath. I had memorized many of Rabindranath's poems, and even some of Shakespeare. However, I chose Science when entering college. I had Physics and Chemistry, but with those subjects, I still had English and Bangla. The learning opportunities at the Military College of Engineering are, unfortunately, rather narrow. There was no recitation, no drama, no chance to read books outside of the syllabus. The army will only teach you how to swallow others up. That is how and what the students are taught.

I moved into 61 North Road from Nasir's house. The only piece of furniture I owned was a bed with a mattress that I had had made while living in Azad Kashmir. I had left that in Pindi but it was delivered to me when I asked. I also bought a few other household items like a blanket, sheets, and curtains. I chose blue curtains. I also bought a couple of chairs for the drawing room where I also installed a black-and-white TV.

There was not much space to sit outside the house – just enough for two or three chairs and a coffee table.

I stayed at the college all day, having my lunch during the break. There was work in the afternoons too as well as sports. Life here was slow, compared to Lahore. Jahangir Nasrullah was an instructor here too. He had got married to a woman named Shabnam and they lived about two or three houses away from Faruk Iqbal, very close to the college. Jahangir Nasrullah's house was new. It had an enclosed lawn in the front where every evening, they would sprinkle water and sit there for snacks. They stay there until late and even sometimes sleep there. Here, people often slept outdoors during the summer months.

One afternoon, Faruk invited me to his home for lunch. He treated me to radish parata and chutney, but I had to pay for it by playing five sets of squash with him so that I could digest this heavy food! Faruk told me that they ate about three and a half pounds of meat a week with some potatoes, vegetables, spinach chutney, and homemade unsweetened yogurt. Every morning, they ate bread, eggs and cheese. The Bangalis, of course, ate the usual fish, meat, vegetables, and dal at home even in West Pakistan. Several varieties of dal were available. The West Pakistanis didn't use much oil in their cooking. They preferred fat or vegetable ghee or ghee from cream.

Jahangir Nasrullah also invited me one night. Dinner was two chapatis, one piece of meat, one piece of potato, and a bit of dal, accompanied by some yogurt. This was supposed to be food for invited guests! Where was the biryani? Where was the polao? Where was the chicken masallam? None of it was there! The food, however, was different in homes of Indians from the Uttar Pradesh – they treated guests to biryani, polao, creamy chicken korma, chicken polao, spicy beef curry, etc. And paan. The paan was from East Pakistan, very well-known. That was everybody's favorite.

Even though the paan came from East Pakistan, the masala was from here – and what a variety there was! There was no limit to the different combinations of paans that could be had at different prices. There was always paan at weddings and parties. Pakistanis would take the time to drive to parties with good food and paan. Lahore had the largest number of paan shops in Pakistan and there was even one shop where the shop owner would not hand the paan to the customer – he would place it in the mouth himself! Once when Ameenah wanted a paan, I took her to this shop. When the paanwala took hold of her face to place the paan in her mouth, she was taken aback and stared at me. I said, "Go on! Open up! Looks like you two have known each other for decades!" She knew I was teasing and we had a good laugh.

Faruk Iqbal and I grew quite close. His wife, Rahila, was eager to meet Ameenah. Faruk was also instrumental in getting me to play cards – bridge. He was great at everything, except bridge. One of my students, Talat from Karachi, also came to play as did two or three other Bangali students. They, however, also indulged in another habit simultaneously – downing one beer after another. The game ended when they got drunk and they left, tottering, even though they would never admit it. Everyone here called me Shahid, or Captain Shahid. In Lahore, I had acquired quite a few names –from Sahid to Shahed. "Kazi" did not make it to my badge, but when the junior Bangalis came, they addressed me as Kazi Bhai, or Kazi Shahid, or Shahid Shaheb.

Soon after I began teaching, I realized what a hard job it was. Only 20% of the students would become engineers on their own, the other 80% had to be made. This was okay for the army, but not so in engineering. These students fell asleep in class or yawned or stared, their minds elsewhere. I understood that, as a teacher, I would have to do something to earn their trust. I tried my best, and within a few days, I noticed an improvement in the class and in the tests. Zahed and Taslim, who were in the Pakistan Military Academy, were also students here. In the beginning, they had tried giving lots of excuses, so I started doing the same. I didn't like their attitude and they didn't seem too happy about remaining in the Core of Engineering. I took tests, they kept failing. They also came to class late sometimes, red handkerchiefs hanging out from their pockets. I gave them up to three warnings but to no avail. Finally, I was forced to throw them out. "Leave!" I said. "You don't have to study here anymore. And you don't have to remain in the Core of Engineering anymore either!" They broke down when I became harsh and came to the mess to beg and cry. I said, "No more! Enough is enough. You've gone too far, so leave now."

They did have to leave finally and this made the others get their act together. I could make my students laugh at every word in the class and sometimes, it would become quite loud. Then I would draw their attention back to the class. This seemed to work well. I also asked them questions and encouraged them to do the same. This worked as well. I asked them to see me if they didn't understand something in class and told them that failure was not an option. When students fail, teachers fail. I said, "We must have self-dignity. Those who respect themselves also respect others. Those who don't cannot respect others."

I sometimes had to take classes at night – OB (Officers' Basic). Except for a couple, the Bangali boys performed well. I knew them all by name and met with them. I would even go into their drawing class. However, as a Bangali myself, I sometimes became partial towards them. But what could I do? Another reason for this partiality too was the low number of Bangalis.

A telegram arrived one day as I sat working in my office. It was from my father-in-law – I had become the father of a son! There was nothing else. I quickly sent a telegram to Ameenah with messages like "Congratulations!" "Well done!" and so on. I asked how she and our son were doing, but I didn't get any response. Later on, I learned that Ameenah had suffered a lot during delivery and had nearly died.

When the news of my son spread among a few people, I had to treat them with sweetmeats from Nowshera the next day at tea. My son was named Nabil by his maternal grandfather. I heard that Boro Bhai and Mejho Bhai had come to Dhaka to meet their nephew and so did Chapabu from Purana Paltan. Abba had written a poem and sent it for his grandson.

Commandant Brigadier Ershad had a meeting with all the instructors one day. He said, "This will be the first time the PTMC are coming to MCE. Your job is to teach them and give them time, so that the students have stay up till 2 am. Give them assignments and theses. Grade and return the assignments the next day."

This would be difficult not only for the students but for the instructors as well. When classes began, assignments were given. Soon exams were taken and everyone did well. The student who grabbed my attention, though, was Major Akram. He was slim and tall with a well-rounded face. He was first in the class and I found out that it was the same for his other classes too, even though grades remained confidential between the student and the instructor. The final grading would be done by Professor Munir, and then the Commandant would verify. Each student had a car. They had been given accommodation a little farther away. Some had brought their families, but classes would end at 2 am, and sometimes even in the early morning. The latter would happen particularly towards the end of the week. I think those students slept only on Sundays.

I met Major Akram in Lahore after many years. Nasrullah was the ENC at the time, a Lieutenant General. He had retired but was serving now as the Chairman of the Public Service Commission. He took me to visit D Hostel which made me nostalgic. Nasrullah had earlier asked me if I would be interested in meeting the VC. Since I hadn't met him as a student, I was eager to do so now. When Nasrullah enquired over the phone, we were asked to go right away.

Ameenah was with me at the time. Someone from the VC's office was waiting to receive us. I opened the door myself and went inside without delay. I entered the VC's office. He was looking through some paperwork, so I sat down. There was something familiar about him and gradually, like a face emerging from a tunnel, I remembered. I asked, "Aren't you Akram?" He replied, "Yes." He looked carefully at me and asked, "Aren't you Major Shahed?" As soon as I nodded, he stood up and shook my hand. Then as we sat, he said, "Your memory is amazing!" I said, "The instructor-student relationship is also amazing. It becomes etched in your memory. But tell me, how come you are here?"

Akram replied, "Parvez Musharrof had told me that Lahore Engineering University is a battlefield. Gunfights occur during the day. Then he asked if I would like to come here as the VC."

I asked, "What about the gunfights?"

Lt. General Akram laughed and said, “It’s over. Remember you were my teacher, sir?”

We had a good laugh together.

Akram was a lot senior to Parvez Musharrof. He eventually became Core Commander after his promotion to Lt. General, but his body and mind remained like those of a Major. Only the grey hairs close to his ears indicated he had aged. He was older than me, but as we reminisced, I noticed how he continued to address me as “sir” throughout. He was a wonderful man in an uncivilized country! He presented us with all their souvenirs and shields, but he didn’t write anything on them. He asked me to fill them in. He also spoke with Ameenah. When he came to say goodbye at the car, he held the door open and shut it himself. Then he waited until we disappeared into the distance.

I also met Nasir around this time. There were other officers at the Center – Bangalis. There was Captain Inam, who later became a Major General in Bangladesh. Captain Sikander was a wonderful man who was very fond of me. He too was a Bangali and had treated me to meals at his home many times. Later, in Bangladesh, he became a Colonel. I also worked with him in Bangladesh and continued to be in touch afterwards.

I learned that the Davis Cup tournament was coming up. The club field in Nowshera had belonged to the British Club of old and I was given responsibility for renovating it. An expert was flying in from Australia with his team and we had to assist them on behalf of the demo company. I didn’t need to be present nor did I have to visit daily, but it would be better if I did. The Australians arrived and uprooted the entire field. They dug down about two feet and then it was time to pour in the rocks, the gravel, the thick layer of sand. Then we would need to collect soil from here and there. Even so, they said, the soil was not the best. The entire job took a month to finish. The team had prepared the grass as soon as they had arrived, and now that grass was being planted and watered. Then it would be dried and rolled up. The grass would be trimmed one day after it dried, then it rested for one day. This went on for two months and then, finally, after three months, the field was ready. Four courts were marked out and Risalpur, seeing this, became jealous. They needed a field too. Col. Ejaz was stationed there with Yazdani. So I took care of this for them. It was all about soil mechanics. The grade was to be 26, 20. The soil had to be mixed accordingly, which I did and the field was done.

I believe anything is possible if one is sincere in their work. But, the workload will usually fall to those who do the work well. And I had always been addicted to work.

After an exchange of letters and telegrams, we decided that Ameenah would come to Rawalpindi with Nabil. I arrived at the airport in Pindi before they did, and from there, we went to the engineers’ mess where I had already booked a room. Ameenah’s cousin, Kashmira, had accompanied her and Nabil, to me, appeared very weak. The child was weak like his mother, but to every father, his son is a prince. That was Nabil to me too.

The next day, we arrived at Risalpur. Major Sarwar’s wife knew we were coming and had prepared some snacks for us. It seemed like I rose in their estimation after Ameenah and Nabil’s arrival – after all, I was now a family man! Mrs. Sarwar was a friendly woman – fat people usually are. She had grown fact on account of that friendliness. Friendly people always treated themselves well – and were the first to gain weight. Then they treated others – with one goal in mind – to make them fat too. Ameenah was happy too.

Dinner arrived from their house too, even though our tiffin carrier was ready to be sent to the mess for food. But Major Sarwar had strict orders – until we began to cook for ourselves, our food would be supplied from his kitchen. So I quickly set to work getting the kitchen ready.

I heard stories of Dhaka from Ameenah. I heard how dangerously ill she had been during delivery. Ekramullah was in Dhaka at that time and he would visit Ameenah's family quite often. Col. Imtiaz Azim had also been posted to Dhaka to the Air Force CMES. He too would visit House no. 13/4.

We were invited to Faruk Iqbal's home for dinner the following night. We went there by car and received great hospitality and respect. We chatted for long, Ameenah and Rahila hitting it off instantly. On another night, we were hosted by Jahangir Nasrullah. Again, as usual, Ameenah got along well with Shabnam. They had all been English medium students. There was Zareen, wife of Major Sayeed, a very beautiful woman who laughed a lot. We were invited to their home as well. Sayeed was the senior-most major. Faruk Iqbal ranked just below him, followed by Jahangir, and then me.

A club was soon formed by the four of us and another by our four wives. Three of us had children with Jahangir's on the way. On top of this, Faruk Iqbal and I would definitely go out to play cards to which Rahila objected greatly. In sympathy, Ameenah said, "What else is there for them to do here anyway? Let them play a little" to which Rahila responded, "You're ok to let them play a little because your husband always wins and mine loses!"

I couldn't blame her as later, we began to play too much. I left Ameenah alone for too long and I still regret that to this day. I shouldn't have done that. And yet, she would say as before, "What else could you all do anyway?"

Our four families would sometimes go out on picnics on the banks of the Kabul River. There were small cottages at intervals but we always took our own food – although food from someone else's kitchen tasted so much better. We would chat and spend some time together before returning home.

We learned that Boro Bhai and Bhabi would be visiting us. Boro Bhai was to attend a Labor Conference and so we went to meet them at Pindi at the Intercontinental. Boro Bhai needed to be there for another two days, but since I couldn't stay, I brought Bhabi back to Risalpur with me. It was still summer then and they were hot, although I had installed khaskhas on the windows. *Khaskhas* was a kind of grass that used to be common in Calcutta. Pipes with holes would be run over them so that they stayed wet. This kept the rooms humidified and cooler. We also got a pedestal fan to draw air inwards.

Boro Bhai came to our home after he was finished at Pindi. He had a speech at the MCE the next day as the guest of honor. I had thought of driving him there myself but a car from the MCE came to pick him up. So, I joined him. The hall was full, the audience including the Commandant and senior teachers. Boro Bhai's speech focused on labor and management. I stood there listening. Boro Bhai did not only write well, he managed well, and spoke well too, leaving everyone deeply satisfied.

The next day was Sunday. I was to take a two-day leave to accompany Boro Bhai to Swat. I asked Jahangir to substitute for me in class at which he made various excuses. I yelled at him in front of Boro Bhai and he immediately agreed. After getting in the car, Boro Bhai said, "How can you behave like this with your colleagues?" I replied, "Boro Bhai, these people respect strength."

We set off for Swat the next morning. As we were about to cross through Mardan, Boro Bhai suddenly said, “Wait, I want to see how the tea here tastes.” Boro Bhai was the type who liked to check things out. So I let him have a taste of their tea. He grimaced. It was so strong!

Soon we were in the mountainous area. The roads wound around the sides of the mountains and soon we saw the Swat River. The roads grew steeper with the mountains on one side. I glanced at Bhai and Bhabi – they were scared stiff. They had never been on the mountain before, and that too, in a car on such a road. Their fear was alleviated, though, as they became drawn in by the natural beauty of the surroundings – the mountains, the river, the trees, the paddy fields on either side. The rest house at Meengora had been booked. Nabil was with us, but Boro Bhai-Bhabi had left their five children in Jessore and so were a little despondent. I said, “Come, let’s go forward. You’ll like it.” I ordered some bread from a tandoori shop, two types of kababs, and salad which I packed in a tiffin carrier. We drove on. There were points along the way that dipped down and came close to the river. We selected such a spot and stopped here to eat. I opened the tiffin carrier to find that instead of two types, the shopkeeper had packed only one. I was mad. We packed everything up again, and returned to the shop in anger. I grabbed the shopkeeper by the collar and shook him several times, “Where is the kabab?!” He stammered, “Forgive me! Forgive me!” and quickly set to work on some fresh kababs. I would have taken the kababs and gone back to where we were, but Boro Bhai refused. The reason? Irritated, he said, “Why did you behave like that? Do you know they are Pathans?” I said, “Boro Bhai, I know every bone in their bodies.”

Boro Bhai wouldn’t listen. He said, “You have swear that you’ll never behave like this again.” So I did. I had never disobeyed Boro Bhai.

The next day, we arrived at the frontier of Swat after driving through more incredible natural beauty. I had heard there was a restaurant here where we could not only find food but a place to sleep as well. There were no farmlands here, just the river, the road, and the mountains. The road ended at Madain. The Karakurram Highway was just a little further away – a road was being constructed to connect Pakistan with China. We soon located a rest house, the owner of which was a tall Englishman. He was a retired colonel of the British Army. I told him that we would have lunch. “What can we get here?” He replied, “You’ll eat whatever I cook. There’s no menu here. I will make chicken curry, dal, and handmade bread. You’ll also get fruit, as much as you want. All the fruit is from my garden, although I don’t have any vegetables. I have spinach from my garden, which I will also serve. Will that do?”

I replied, “Absolutely!”

He let us have a room to rest in. Boro Bhai sat on the verandah to admire the mountains. The mountains looked white in the distance. There were no trees. The river flowed – very steep, deep, and straight. I asked the colonel, “Why did you make a rest house here?” He said, “I was in the British Army, and posted in both Pakistan and India. I left for Britain in ’47 but soon realized it wasn’t for me. The people had become too mechanical. I wasn’t married and had few relatives. So I thought about it and decided to settle here. I took permission from the government and set up this rest house with the intention of living here for the rest of my days. I would have a garden and eat whatever I can produce there. The only thing that I didn’t make here is that bread.”

I was surprised to hear of his desire to live in this lonely place for the rest of his life. He said, “Don’t be surprised. No one knows how one’s old age will be but it will be lonely, a life of regret. Since I have to

be alone, why not in a place like this? I'm happy here. We're in this world for a very short time, and then we must leave when we're done."

I asked, "What else do you do here?"

He said, "There used to be nothing here when I came. Now I sometimes have visitors who stay for a couple of days. They come usually on Sundays. I have a cook and two others who take care of the house. There is more work in the winter – I have a fireplace that uses wood. My time passes by. I walk around in the mountains and gaze at them, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars. I garden a little. This is my life, you know, Captain. Life goes on."

I asked, "How does it go on?"

Without explaining much, he said, "Make the best use of it and grow gracefully." He then burst into laughter.

We were enjoying our ordered tea and the beautiful scenery when the colonel came up to us again. He said, "The tea is complimentary. I have been to Calcutta and had tea in Darjeeling. But now I don't get that anymore. This tea is from Sylhet."

When it was lunch time, we saw that the colonel himself was bringing the food out. We asked him several times to eat with us but he wouldn't. He said that he ate once at ten in the morning and again at six. During the rest of the day, he drank just one cup of tea and water from the spring.

After lunch, we took a walk along the roads and peeped at the river. How it thundered on, how strong the current! Just like the Neelum River in Kashmir, only that the water was bluish there. This river was not quite so. The other river was quite broad but not so this one. I believe this river branched off into tributaries right after this area.

We packed up and got in the car so that we could return before dark. The colonel saw us to the car and bade farewell.

Boro Bhai and Bhabi would be leaving the next day. Boro Bhai took me aside and tucked two hundred taka into my palm. I was grateful for the gift. It was much needed as I had spent quite a lot already. Boro Bhai, however, continued to talk about that two hundred taka for the rest of his life and would have carved it in stone if he could. I had a high temperature that night, so I called for Faruk Iqbal and told him I was ill. Faruk Iqbal promised to see Boro Bhai off the next day.

Our sister, Hasnu's husband, Dr. Ali Ahmed, was working at Lahore Staff College as Directing Staff. We planned to visit them, with Captain Sayeed's wife, Zareen, accompanying us. Her home was in Lahore and would be traveling with her children. We stopped at Major Akhtar's home in Jhelum on the way and had some food. Major Akhtar, with Bhabi, was always very hospitable. We reached Lahore just a little after dark. After dropping of Zareen at her home, we went to Hasnu's house. I stayed for two or three days, and then, leaving Ameenah and Nabil there, I came back. Hasnu had had a daughter, Rumana. A very pretty child. Nabil laughed and played. He was just learning to walk.

I returned a few days later to bring Ameenah back. A few days after this, I received a long letter from Boro Bhai in very foul language. I had received a letter like this once before – after the university

workshop episode, although Abba had, at the same time, sent me an encouraging missive. This time, the fault, of course, was mine. I should have taken something when I went to visit my sister's home. But I was under financial constraints, which I had told no one of. If I had to buy something in Lahore, I'd have to shop around quite a bit. Hasnu could have told me of my mistake or written to me about it. Instead, she had involved everyone in Jessore, Khulna, Abba, Boro Bhai, and the entire clan. I didn't appreciate this and found it distasteful. Who writes a letter to announce that her brother had come to visit with just half a pound of shondesh? I even heard from Hasnu that when Boro Bhai had visited her in Lahore, he had taken nothing!

In the meantime, something happened to Nabil. For some reason, he had a constant stomach ache. He would begin crying in the evening and continue through the night. He only slept towards dawn. Major Sarwar next door had been posted elsewhere and now there was a Pathan major living there. He had exams at the Staff College, but because of Nabil, he couldn't study, and in fact, ended up failing. And yet, he was cheerful. He said, "I'll sit for the exam again next year. Let's get your son better first."

But Nabil didn't get better. He had diarrhea now. We took him to Arshad, a good doctor in Risalpur, and he prescribed some medicines. But Ameenah, without my knowledge, taking advice from a peon called Sagir who apparently dealt in amulets and local herbs, did not administer the doctor's medicine to Nabil for three days. Nabil was almost dead by then. Sayeed rushed home to us when he heard and said, "You have to rush to Pindi right now. My sister is a doctor and so is her husband, Col. Ashfaq. He's also Yahya Khan's personal physician, so you'll have no trouble getting into the Pindi CMH. My sister will take care of everything. Get going. I'll talk to her over the phone."

Sayeed waited to see us off before leaving. I drove at top speed and reached Sayeed's sister's home in Pindi within two and a half hours. She was waiting for us outside and rushed to the car as soon as we arrived. She took one look at Nabil and said, "You need to get him to the CMH right away! I have arranged everything with Col. Rahman there. He will be waiting and will take care of everything. I fear that you're too late – the child is completely dehydrated."

In spite of the urgency, I asked, "Should we meet Col. Ashfaq?"

In a whisper, she replied, "He just returned this morning from Iran. It was the Shah's coronation ceremony and Yahya had gone to attend. He had drunk and sung so much during the party there that he peed in his pants. My husband had to bundle him into the plane and return to Pindi. He couldn't stay for the coronation. He couldn't take such humiliation and now he's crying in his bedroom. You take your son to the hospital."

I couldn't help bursting out in laughter in spite of the dire situation we were in – Yahya Khan peed in his pants!

I was in uniform, so I entered the CMH quickly. I asked for Col. Rahman's office but as I stopped the car, I spotted col. Abdur Rahman Khan waiting at the entrance. He rushed to the car and took a look at Nabil. He grabbed him like a kite and ran off with him. Ameenah went with him while I sat waiting in his office. A couple of hours passed by before he came and told me that they couldn't locate any veins. Finally they found one in his foot through which a drip had been given. He was being administered saline now. "What have you done, Shahid?" he questioned.

My head drooped. He left the room and then returned to say, “You know what? Go home. Have dinner and come back. We will eat here and I’ll take care of Ameenah. The patient is on the DI (Dangerously Ill) list. He’s very weak.”

I sat in the car to drive to Col. Dr. Rahman’s home, tears streaming down my cheeks as I drove. What a strange thing was life! Mrs. Rahman was waiting for me at the door, her face gloomy. She sat me down and comforted me. I had known them in Quetta – Lahore, Quetta, Dhaka, and now Pindi. I went back to the CMH at night and learned that my son’s condition was unchanged. The drip was working very slowly. I couldn’t meet Ameenah.

The next morning, without informing anyone, I drove to Risalpur. I needed money. God forbid, but if I needed to arrange for a burial, I needed information. If I took a free site, the grave would not be protected. A paid site required two hundred taka. I went to the college and applied for leave. Most people had already learned about Nabil’s illness and everyone looked grave.

I had to head out again to Pindi, but I was worried about how to manage two hundred taka. Suddenly, Sayeed approached me and tucked two hundred taka forcefully into my palm. There was no need for the force. I headed back and reached Pindi by evening. Col. Rahman was waiting. He asked, “Where have you been?”

I told him that I had gone to Risalpur to apply for leave to which he made no reply. He saw me staring and said, “The drip is working better now. We have to wait till morning. Don’t go in there now. Ameenah was very upset. She has been fed and given some sleeping pills.”

The next morning, Col. Rahman told me to put on my uniform and took me to his office. He took a quick walk and returned to report, “It’s a miracle! Nabil is awake and looking at his mother.”

I burst out loudly into tears at his words as he stroked my head for a while. Then he said, “Calm down. We will take the drip out as soon as we can so he can be fed orally.”

I was informed in the afternoon that the drip had been removed, but the child was still very ill. He had been brought into a room so he could be breastfed. He would also be given other foods and some more saline. I went to the room to find Nabil quite active and I thanked Allah a thousand times. Ameenah was smiling too. She was breastfeeding although the amount was meager. But other foods were also being given. Water was being fed with a spoon. This went on the whole night. Ameenah was persuaded to eat a little too. She ate little usually, but now she was eating even less. Captain Shahid Hasan Selim from our old town Kashba also helped a lot. He attempted to take me to his house for dinner on two occasions, comforting me all the while. I met Mozammel at the Engineers’ Mess, as well as Sabbir, Major Manzoor, and Major Latif. We stayed another two days. Nabil was eating well now, and asking for water a lot, so his dehydrated state improved quickly. Ameenah deserved full credit – both for creating the crisis and for handling it! I was surprised to see how much effort a person can give and then how quickly they recovered and smiled.

Col. AR Khan told me that Ameenah and Nabil would stay at their home while I left for Risalpur. When Nabil had fully recovered, he would let me know so I could come and pick them up. He would listen to nothing else. I did not have the courage to stand up to him so I gave in.

I stayed at his home one day as well before heading back to Risalpur, returning after 15-20 days to pick up my wife and son. Nabil couldn't walk yet – he had resorted to crawling again. Kashmira, who had gone with us to Pindi, was also at AR Khan's home. She was a great help to Nabil.

A few days later, my father-in-law arrived and stayed for a few days. I took him sightseeing to Peshawar. He went to visit a good friend of his, Dr. Ahmed Hasan Dani, a teacher at the Peshawar Engineering College, a renowned fellow. He had been in East Pakistan. My father-in-law then travelled to Lahore, and after visiting Brigadier Sabdaad, he returned to Dhaka. He heard the details of Nabil's illness but I did not see him get angry or annoyed. I have not met anyone who knew better than him when to react and what to say at any given time.

Chapter Thirteen

My Days at Peshawar Engineering College

I was the external examiner for the "Theory of Machines" course at Peshawar Engineering College in those days, so I had to travel quite frequently to Peshawar. Among the students were Pathans and ethnic groups, but the quality of students in general was highly unsatisfactory. There were very few good students. Once when students were taking a viva exam, one tribal students was called in. He looked grave as he walked in and sat down quickly. It was obvious he didn't want to be here. I asked him, "What is the name of this part?" He said, "I don't know." The next question elicited the same answer. A couple of questions later, he stood up suddenly and pulled a pistol out, aiming it at my head! He shouted, "Bastard! You teach us all kinds of things all year and now want to test us with a set up shop of a few items? Why isn't everything here? Bring a hundred things and I will tell you the names of fifty. If I get them, I pass; if not, I fail!"

By this time I had started sweating profusely. The internal examiner sat there, dumbfounded. The student stood up straight and looking at us, said, "Go and get everything. Then call me." Then he strode out.

I took a deep breath, then asked the internal examiner to bring everything. Then that student was called back in. He was ecstatic. He pointed at each item and said whatever he felt like. Then he would ask, "Is that right?" What could I say but "Yes, right." After all, I only had one life! Finally, he stood back and said, "See, this is how to take an exam." Then he took his pistol out again and showed us that it wasn't even loaded! He didn't even have any bullets in his pocket either. He laughed as he left the room. The two of us examiners stared at each other. The internal said, "How much will you give him now?" I replied, "Fifty."

When I returned from the college one day, I learned that Ameenah was going to be a mother again. I asked, "Didn't you know?" She said, "No." Then she said, "It's already five months."

She had done no calculations, no counting at all. It's not a good idea for anyone to be so innocent or naïve. She wrote to her parents apprehensively and I to my parents. Faruk, Jahangir, Sayeed – all got to know. Faruk did all but beat me. As her health was poor, Ameenah left for Dhaka with Nabil and Kashmira.

Life at Risalpur was pretty much the same every day but it wasn't boring because we had mess nights. The most senior officers would be there, and that too, weekly. There was always a party or the other at the club to which all the officers came with their wives. Different events took place there and so the days went by blissfully.

In 1970, I had to visit Dhaka and Jessore twice on account of Mintu's wedding. Even though she was ill, Ameenah also went to Jessore. The bride was from Khulna, Ira. I went to Khulna with Mintu where Boro Bhai had made all the arrangements.

After the wedding, we came back with the new bride. There was no electricity in the house and the rooms were dark. I had already sent Abba the money for the reception but there was no reception, causing a bit of an upset.

I returned to Dhaka with Ameenah. I had only a few days of leave, so I soon left for Risalpur. In September I received news that Ameenah had given birth to another son. I had already decided to name this son after

my father. His name was to be Anis. He was born in Dhaka CMH on 26 September 1970. I was 29 years old then.

I had taken leave in January and August and now it was towards the end of the year, so I applied for leave. I was granted a one month leave and I travelled to Pindi with Col. Janjua who was on his way there. We had a good time chatting along the way. From Pindi, I took a bus to Lahore where I stayed overnight before travelling to Dhaka the next day. I went straight to my father-in-law's room on reaching the house. There I saw Nabil on the bed and Anis lying there on his back. He was so tiny and so beautiful and so bright! I was mesmerized. Nabil recognized me instantly. He hadn't learned to talk yet and so he pointed at Anis to show me. His grandparents, uncle and aunts were delighted. No matter what Nabil did, it brought a smile to everyone's face in that house.

I met with Ekramullah and Lt. Mohsin in Dhaka. I thanked Ekramullah for taking Ameenah to the CMH. Bashirul Haq had left for America. I went to Purana Paltan and visited DulaBhai, Mustafa Sarwar, at his office in Bangla Bhaban where one could gain some knowledge of the politics of the last couple of years. Later though I learned that most of them were just stories.

Nabil and Ameenah accompanied me to Jessore. Anis was left behind in Dhaka. Kashmira would not be going with us this time but it wasn't possible for Ameenah to handle two little children. So we decided that Anis would be brought over later by his Nani. Leaving him behind with his grandmother while we went to Jessore was a test to see how the child adjusted to the situation and also whether his Nani could handle him. I had to accept this arrangement whether I liked it or not. We thought it wasn't possible for Ameenah to deal with two small children, but it wasn't till later that we realized what a mistake we had made.

I still carry the burden of that guilt to this day.

In Jessore, I realized that Moin had become involved in politics. Ever since Abba's political suffering, he had forbidden one thing at home – politics. Now he was old – although he walked one hour every morning and went to the bazar. Still he didn't have that the same strength anymore and Moin had taken this chance to meddle with politics.

We were getting ready to leave for Dhaka when Moin came, and grabbing Ameenah's hand, said, "Bhabi, you must not go to Pakistan." She asked, "But what's wrong with that, brother?" Moin said, "Because you won't be able to return. And please don't leave your little child Anis behind." Ameenah said, "Listen, Bhai, we're leaving now for sure but we will return and meet each other again." Moin replied, "Bhabi, we won't see each other again." Ameenah was taken aback. "Bhai, never say such things again," saying which she ruffled his hair affectionately. Abba also gave us his blessings.

At the Jessore airport, we ran into Awami League leaders Mushiur Rahman Chacha and Roushon Ali Chacha. I touched their feet in respect. They said, "So we heard you're now a captain!" I replied, "Yes." They were both happy for me. I said, "Chacha, remember us in your prayers. We're leaving for Pakistan in a day or two." They said, "What? Aren't you staying to vote? You must vote. Everyone is so excited about it."

"But I'm not even a voter," I replied.

They said, “Oh, that’s not going to be a problem.”

I did not respond.

After two or three days in Dhaka, I set off for Pakistan. Ameenah stayed behind. She would travel later with Nabil. And after that, my mother-in-law would bring Anis. Before leaving, I stared at Anis lying on the bed. How beautiful he was! What a nose, what eyes, what a face! I also hugged Nabil.

Chapter Fourteen

The Declaration of Independence: A Time of Anxiety and Fear

I stayed in Lahore for a day before heading off to Pindi. I had one day of leave left so I stayed at the mess. In the morning, I hired a car and then went to Major Mozammel's home. Mozammel and his wife were always very kind to me. It was Election Day for the National Assembly. They had been invited to Brigadier Majidul Huq's home, so I went along with them. Majidul Huq was a serious type of person and he knew my father-in-law. They had been at Calcutta's Shibpur College together in the first year. As the evening progressed, more people began to drop in. Some of them had come after voting, and there was an excitement in the air. There was no knowing how the results would turn out. How well would Bangabandhu win and who would he select to accompany him, and so on were the topics of discussion. We had dinner in the midst of all this and then I excused myself to head off to Risalpur.

Life at Risalpur was the same. There was nothing new, but these days, politics was often discussed at gatherings. Everyone presumed that the Muslim League, the Awami League and a couple of other parties would form a government in collaboration. Bhutto would win some seats.. These people saw politics in their own way and talked about it. A Pathan Major said, "This Bangali Sheikh Mujib will rule you soon." And everyone laughed at the thought. They were quite entertained.

In the meantime, I received a notice to move out of the house on North Road to a new place. A lieutenant colonel was to replace me there. So I did. When I saw the tiny two-room house, my blood boiled. The next day, I sat at the office and went through the rule books. According to the law, if I had to move out of one place, the other place had to be of the same or better standard. So I wrote a letter stating that the house I had been given now was so below the standard of my previous abode that I did not like it. I felt a sense of satisfaction after I had handed the letter to Major Azma. I took a carbon copy to Faruk Iqbal. I said, "Sir, please read this letter." He took the letter, read it and burst out into laughter. He couldn't stand Azma and he said, "Listen, son, you're right and your letter is okay. But is the man who will read your letter okay?"

I replied, "I don't care what happens. I won't leave my current house."

He said, "Okay then."

By afternoon, many others came to know of my objection. They said, "You might get a better place but it might come with a mean ACR." I said, "That's fine with me."

A few days later, I was summoned by the Commandant. A few of my colleagues came to know about this. They said, "Go. Go and get your ACR. You've burned your bridges!"

I went to the Commandant's office. I sat when he asked me to sit. He took out a piece of paper and told me to read it. I did – and I was shocked. He said, "Look at the grading." I did. He said, "The decision is that you can join the PMA as Platoon Commander. Or you can go to Washington. Or you can go to the Company, become a Major and then the Company Commander. It's a Staff College. Give the exam." He laughed and asked, "Are you surprised?" I replied, "Well, a little." He responded, "Look, Shahid, none of that matters. What does is your work, your accomplishments. That shows the strength of your character.

I was not informed that you had been asked to vacate your house, but I was shown your letter. But this is all to your advantage."

I thanked him, stood up and saluted. Brigadier Ershad extended his hand and I shook it. He said, "Congratulations."

I got a good ACR. One or two people came to visit me. Someone asked, "How's was the ACR?" I said, "It was as you said." They were ecstatic. I met Faruk Iqbal who asked, "Shahid, what happened with your ACR?" I told him everything. He replied, "Well, now my respect for the Commandant just increased a little."

I went home and turned on the television. I set up a few stools and a dining chairs. One by one, people began to drop in. A lot of the students were Bangali these days. Talat, Mustafa, and Saif came, and we played cards. But the conversation was focused on politics. All the while, the television broadcast special programs on account of the election.

Some of the results began to come in after midnight. We all had class the next morning, so we were forced to break up the party. I served dinner to everyone. When I went to the college, I heard that the election results was somewhat odd. I returned home and turned on the TV again. People began to drop in after lunch at the mess. As usual, a card game was set up, and the results were starting to pour in. There was no stopping now. The number of programs on TV decreased as the results became the focus. Soon, it started to become obvious that Bangabandhu had got majority votes. On the other hand, Bhutto from West Pakistan was also forging ahead. Predictions by the experts, thus, began to go haywire.

The next day, I went to the college. Bangabandhu had become the single leader in Pakistan. At the morning tea gathering, I heard the West Pakistanis excitedly declaring what a good man Sheikh Shaheb was, how tall he was, a graduate of Islamia College, a good leader, a great orator, what weight he carried – in short, they couldn't stop praising him. We, the Bangalis who were present, became partial, especially Mujib and I. Later on, we were accused of embroiling this man in the Agartala Conspiracy. How in the world would we do that! That led to much argument. When someone brought up the Six-Point Demand, it was dealt away with too. There was no end to it. But if we had to stay together and run the state together, these disputes would quickly be resolved. Tea time was extended. Those who had class dispersed one by one. The Commandant, the Brigadier had grave looks on their faces; Azma's face was dark.

I got a new house, a carbon copy of the old house on Road 61. I accepted it, especially when I heard that during World War I, Churchill had stayed here. Time passed. The Convocation where Yahya Khan was supposed to attend was postponed. Sheikh Shaheb was to become Prime Minister, and he would be invited to the college. But, within a few days, the tone at the tea gathering took a different turn. One day, Faruk Iqbal summoned me to his office. He said, "Shahid, I just returned from Pindi. You know my father is a Director General and he has a lot of friends as do I. I heard from my father that those in the upper echelons are quite unhappy with Sheikh Mujib's single-handed majority win. They are worried." Of course, I had nothing to say, so I listened in silence.

I was now a Major and more money was coming in. I was comfortable as I was now able to send money both to Jessore and Dhaka. Life went on but gradaully, things began to change. Faruk Iqbal summoned

me again, “Shahid, did you know a lot of weapons and soldiers are going to East Pakistan from the West? Shiploads. Even constant plane trips. It’s all making me very uncomfortable.”

Faruk Iqbal could not stand the sight of Bhutto Shaheb. Why, I have no idea. He said, “That man is a creep and a pervert.” He also said that there was a conspiracy taking shape in Larkanai in which eight or ten army generals were involved. If Yahya Khan was busy with drink and women, it was Bhutto who had brainwashed him into being so. And a few generals had switched over to Bhutto’s side.

The mastermind was Bhutto. He knew that he could never be Prime Minister of Pakistan. The only way out was to separate East Pakistan from Pakistan. What other way was there? It was necessary to crackdown on East Pakistan telling them that Pakistan was to remain one country. If Yahya agreed, Bhutto’s generals would begin the crackdown through which they would incite genocide, rape, and arson, which would eventually lead to separation. This would allow the Sindhi aristocrat Bhutto to remain untainted and therefore become the Prime Minister of Pakistan. He would then sort out Bangladesh and its Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was all his plan. There were about 600 student officers of which each was the brother or son or brother-in-law of a general. So secrets seeped out.

I heard this from my student Ehsan. His brother was a general, a rich man from Sindh. It was March 7, 1971. I had gone to the tennis course where I saw Col. Riaz with a couple of other officers who were sitting there, not playing. I asked, “Sir, won’t you play?” He said, “No. I have sent for some news. Let that come first.”

I asked again, “Sir, what news?”

He said, “Sheikh Mujib is giving a speech in Dhaka. We need to know what he’s saying.”

A little later, Captain Askari came and said, “Sir, there’s no UDI.” On being asked what UDI was, Col. Riaz said, “It means Unilateral Declaration of Independence.” It seemed as though everyone heaved a sigh of relief at this. It was already evening and there was no more time to play. So I returned home. In short, while Bangladesh sat sucking its thumb from March 3, Bhutto’s generals sent division after division and pretended to continue talks. Col. Riaz said that if the UDI had taken place on March 3, East Pakistan would have been lost. Yahya and Bhutto had taken a calculated risk.

Then the rest of the political game began. Rumors spread that Yahya Khan was coming to Dhaka. Many leaders had come before – except Bhutto and his gang. There he would speak with Bangabandhu and everything would be resolved. I had only source – Major Faruk Iqbal. He had friends, ADCs like General Ishaq’s son in Pindi. Whatever news he received, he shared it with me. One day, he said to me, “Shahid, they’re taking time – because troops and arms are being moved in from West Pakistan into East Pakistan continuously. I don’t understand what’s happening. Let’s wait and see.”

Everything was being transferred through Colombo because India had shut off its air ways to Pakistan. Sri Lanka, however, became involved in the genocide in Bangladesh, and recognized Bangladesh as an independent country only after the death of Bangabandhu.

What else was left for me to see? Instead, I set out in search of cow’s milk because Ameenah and Nabil were coming. We needed fresh cow’s milk for Nabil. Here, there was an abundance of buffalos – grass-fed buffalos. Risalpur survived on the milk from the Pathans’ buffalos. Finally, I made an arrangement

with the owner of a buffalo through my batsman. I asked Faruk Iqbal, "What is buffalo milk like?" He said, "It's good but fatty. It's great for children. You can also make good yogurt, lassi, and butter."

Talks were going on in Dhaka. Not much could be gleaned from the papers though as every report was written in favor of those here. They were speaking against the Six-Point Demand in an attempt to garner support for Bhutto. Everyone was speaking for Yahya Khan and slandering Sheikh Mujib. I didn't subscribe to any papers – instead I read any that I came across at the MCE. I left for Pindi to pick up Ameenah and Nabil who flew in via Colombo and Karachi because an Indian plane had been hijacked and burned in Lahore. After this incident, India would not allow any Pakistani plane to fly over its air ways.

Ameenah and Nabil arrived in West Pakistan through Sri Lanka after much trouble. Although exhausted, Ameenah was smiling. I picked them up and took to the Engineers' Mess in Pindi.

The next day, we went to Major Mozammel's house to see if there was any news. He was at the Army General Headquarters, but there was not much news to be had. However, he did say that the situation was dire. He said, "Shahid, these people will give nothing."

Nabil was playing with Major Mozammel's children, so we stayed for a while. Then we returned to Risalpur. The house I was in now was new to them, and Ameenah liked everything, either halfway or all the way. She only saw the good in things, never seeing even half the bad parts nor saying anything. It looked like Nabil didn't have much objection to buffalo milk. He loved milk and drank it. With my raise, I could afford to improve conditions at home. I was doing relatively well – teaching, studying, and sometimes playing cards. I also played squash and tennis. I had several good friends who were Pakistani: Faruk Iqbal, Sayeed, Jahangir, of whom the first two were senior although we were all Majors by now.

The 25th of March 1971 came and went. There was tension in the air. Nothing was said, and the night passed by. 26 March arrived. I went to work and even took a class. When I returned home, I found Ameenah sitting on the verandah. Still wearing the clothes from the night before, she didn't look like she had showered. She looked devastated. She stood up when she saw me arrive. Her usual smiling face was now cloud of darkness. I asked, "What happened?" She told me that she wasn't able to tune into the Dhaka Center on her three-band radio.

I knew nothing myself, so the only thing I could ask her to do was remain calm.

Yahya Khan gave a speech on the evening of March 26. His main message: Sheikh Mujib was a traitor. He would be punished. He banned the Awami League and asked the army to restore law and order. I sat in front of the TV, stunned. Then I turned off the television and ate a little bit of food as I hadn't eaten anything all afternoon. In fact, nothing had been cooked that day. The evening had just passed and Yahya Khan's speech ended when all of Risalpur broke out in excited waves. I saw how horrific and terrifying joy could be. It meant that the entire West Pakistan was celebrating at the thought of beating the Bangalis to a pulp. Now the Bangalis would understand what it meant to be a colony. In the meantime, I heard victory cries over the murder of Bangalis. Sometimes, now, I hear that the West Pakistanis had no idea what was going on in East Pakistan, but that is completely absurd. They knew about it fully and celebrated wholeheartedly. They know even now. Even the fourteen or fifteen year old schoolchildren know. Those who say they do not know are pretending. It's necessary to pretend and lie when you lose.

The Bangali officers, all students, began to arrive at my house one by one. They had all gone to eat at the mess but couldn't. They had been scared away by the excitement and boasting of the Pakistanis. Those who had families returned home. The bachelors came to my house.

We laid out blankets and sheets on the floor, and put out all the chairs we had. After Nabil went to sleep, the entire house became as silent as a grave. Each face reflected terror and alarm. No spoke. They just stared at each other. The night deepened. There was a sound at the door. I thought it must be another Bangali looking for shelter. I opened it to find Akbar, one of my Pathan students, standing there. He said, "Sir, these people are bad. They are likely to cause some horrific harm."

I said, "Come inside please." He poked his head inside, but seeing so many people, he withdrew. Suddenly, he took a pistol out of his pocket and handed it to me. He said, "This has six bullets – one for Bhabi, one for Nabil, one for you, and the rest three for the bastard Pakistanis!" He left abruptly after that.

He had knocked on the door next door too but no one had answered. As soon as Akbar left, Mujib opened his door and came to me. "Sir, please give me that pistol. I am alone with my wife and child."

I considered the matter and then handed the pistol to Mujib. The night went by. Some slept, some stayed awake. Around five in the morning, the students left for the mess one by one. I too got dressed to go to work. I looked at Ameenah and Nabil anxiously. Despite this situation, on the second day after returning to Bangladesh, we were asked, "So! Did you enjoy yourselves in Pakistan? Did you have a good vacation?"

I really don't understand how people could say such things. Were the Pakistanis sitting us on their laps and feeding us sweets when the Bangalis were at war with them? These kinds of taunts were part of the conspiracy – stories made up in Pakistan and spread in Bangladesh by members of the ISI to destabilize the country.

Today, I realize that these were all plans executed by Bhutto, the ISI and some freedom fighters who worked for Pakistan. These FFs who had run away from Pakistan were very smart, working as agents. Their job was to spread propaganda against prisoners of war, insult them, murder Bangabandhu, and make Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic.

I had just entered the office when the peon, Sagir, rushed up to me and said, "Sir, Professor Munir has asked you to see him." I went straight to his office and knocked on his door.

"Come in," he said.

I entered to see that there were no chairs in sight. He was standing, so I saluted him and remained standing as well.

The first thing he asked was, "Did you hear Yahya Khan's speech last night?"

I said, "Sir, …"

He questioned, "Do you know that Sheikh Mujib has been arrested?"

I replied, "No."

He asked, "You must know that the Awami League has been banned."

I said, “Yes, I heard that in the speech. I also heard that Mujib is to be tried.”

He asked, “What is your opinion of the speech?”

I said, “Sir, Yahya Khan gave the speech, so the opinion must be his. What can I say?”

He egged me on, “Don’t pretend! Say what’s on your mind.”

I remained silent, but he kept asking me to say something.

Finally, I said, “He didn’t need to ban the Awami League. It’s also not right to arrest and try Sheikh Mujib.”

I had barely finished talking when Professor Munir shouted, “You Bangalis are all bastards! You are not real Muslims – you’re pretenders! You’re all traitors, conspirators! You deserve to be beaten up. Killed. And we need to send all the Hindus to India. The Bangalis have murdered the Pakistani Biharis, raped the women, cut off their breasts. They have been shipped over to Karachi and are still coming.”

I couldn’t believe that Biharis and West Pakistanis were being sent in ships to Karachi after their limbs had been cut off, they had been raped, their breasts had been severed, and they had been tortured in numerous other ways. I hadn’t even read about this in the papers. Where did these Hitler-like tales emerge from? These stories had spread through Pakistan within a couple of days and there was only one thing on everyone’s minds – kill the Bangalis, we don’t want the people in East Pakistan, we only want the land.

God knows what else Munir said! I was broiling from head to toe. Not able to stand it any longer, I got hold of his tie and pulled his head down onto the table in one shot. I have no idea where I held him but I saw that his tongue was hanging out. Suddenly someone pulled me away by the waist and ordered, “Stop it!”

It was Faruk Iqbal. He was red in the face and his eyes were blazing. He dragged me outside where I saw two or three other officers. He took me into his office and gave me a towel, saying, “Go into the bathroom and wipe yourself up. You’re all wet.”

I obeyed. It was winter, and that too in Risalpur. Still, he turned on the fan. A little later, he asked, “Do you want a cup of tea?” I didn’t say a word. He ordered the peon to get me a cup anyway. Then he said, “Sit here. Drink your tea and don’t go anywhere.” He handed me an old newspaper, telling me to read it until he returned. Then he stepped out.

I sat in shock. I got up once to turn off the fan. I drank the tea, but I couldn’t read the paper. I couldn’t think – my mind completely blank. I have no idea how long it was when Faruk Iqbal returned. Coolly, he said, “Shahid, I didn’t hear the whole story but I did hear most of it. I also saw what you did. I have decided that you will now accompany me to your house. Yunus will bring your car.”

We went to my house in Faruk Iqbal’s car. Ameenah was sitting on the verandah, a statue of depression. I don’t think she had showered or brushed her hair or changed her clothes. Faruk Iqbal looked at her and said, “There was a little misunderstanding between Shahid and Professor Munir. So I thought it best that he stay home today. There’s no class today anyway.”

Saying he would come again in the evening, Faruk Iqbal left.

I told Ameenah briefly about what had happened that morning, even though she had no desire to hear. She just said, "There's no news of Bangladesh on the radio." She had been able to tune in to BBC but she had heard nothing positive. I couldn't think straight and the time passed in a trance. The batman had cooked some rice and *dal*, so we ate some of it for lunch.

Faruk Iqbal came back in the afternoon, with Major Jahangir. I sat with them in the drawing room. Faruk Iqbal said, "Shahid, the news isn't good. I believe Professor Munir has reported the incident to the Commandant. He said that you attacked him in your rage against Yahya Khan's speech. You cursed him, saying that the country couldn't stay together and that, from now on, East Pakistan would be separated. You cursed Yahya Khan and then pulled him down to the ground by his tie in an attempt to kill him. His tongue was hanging out and you slapped and punched him. He was saved at the last moment because I came in and pushed you away to rescue him."

Then Faruk Iqbal asked, "Do you have anything to say?"

I replied, "Sir, you have heard most of the story and you know that I said nothing. He had summoned me himself. Sagir can verify. Yes, I did pull him down by his tie but I never hit him. I never said that East Pakistan would be separated from now on. Nor did I curse Yahya Khan. In fact, I said nothing at all."

Jahangir heard everything as well. Then Faruk Iqbal said, "Matters will take their course. This is being sent to the General Headquarters now – only because you're a Bangali. Otherwise, you'd have been court martialed right here. The Commandant told everyone to spread the word about this incident in the mess and club. No one will have anything to do with you from now on. No one will visit you. And no one will talk to you if they can help it. So, you should not go to the mess at all. Or to the club. Bhabi will not go either. That's all for now. However, Jahangir, Sayeed and I have decided that until we receive written orders, we will continue to visit you. And you may visit us as well."

They left. But time wouldn't pass. I couldn't read anything. I had become numb.

Yet, I went to the office the next day. To Sagir, I said, "Bring me today's papers or anything from the last few days."

There were only headlines in the papers from which nothing could be gleaned. But Ameenah's intuition was strong. When I returned home, she said, "There are terrible massacres taking place at home. Go and find out if any of our family members are still living."

Her words struck me. It was a Sunday. So we went to Imtiaz Azim's older brother, Brigardier Ejaz Azim's house in Nowshera. He knew us and would visit in Murree. They were not die-hard Pakistanis. He invited us in very courteously and Ameenah and I sat down side by side. I said, "Sir, you must be aware of what is happening in East Pakistan at the moment."

He said, "Shahid, believe me, I know nothing."

He had an older brother, a General at the GHQ. Apparently, he knew nothing either. But Brigadier Ejaz at least told us that 8 or 10 generals had created this conspiracy with Bhutto. And Yahya Khan had been drunk since he returned from East Pakistan – he had been drunk while giving his speech. And he was still being distracted with women and wine, while those generals were doing whatever they thought necessary

with Bhutto supporting a group of them. What was happening over there? What was the situation like? There was no report coming in and even if there were, he didn't know anything.

Since we couldn't get any news through him, we handed Brig. Ejaz the pieces of paper we had brought with Ameenah's father's address and my family's address in Jessore written on them. We said, "Sir, if you could at least help us get some news, we would be relieved." He said, "Yes, I can get news. I have a friend over there, General Khadim Raza. I will ask him. Come back tomorrow evening."

When I went back the next evening, he handed me a piece of paper which said, "They are in peace. Hooliganism is over." I understood the implications of these words only later. This was a horrible lie from General to Brigadier. Brigadier Ejaz left within a few days after being promoted to General.

We languished in Risalpur. There were no letters, no news. I kept to my room, going to the mess only for tea. There, Major Gulzar sometimes spoke up. He would say, "Don't think this is a solution. There's more to come…" A few others spoke up in support. Colonel Kiyani was excited. Why hadn't he been sent to East Pakistan yet? He would have beaten everyone to a pulp by now.

The Commandant raised his hand to silence him and changed the subject. The Bangalis remained silent. Still, one day, Siddique and Mujib got into a quarrel. Siddique kept saying to Mujib, "Are you trying to say that we will need to have a passport and visa to visit Dhaka?" Mujib replied, "Exactly!" And that was it! Only the Commandant's arrival at that moment prevented things from escalating.

The next day, Faruk Iqbal summoned me and said, "Professor Munir doesn't want you going for tea to the mess. Have your tea and snacks brought to your room, if needed."

Ameenah was still depressed. Her smiles and laughter had vanished. As she ate, she said, "Are you going to stay here? Won't you run away?" I remained silent. I was wondering how the thought of running away had entered the head of an honest, simple, smiling, chatty Bangali woman. It was actually the intense effect of the happenings in East Pakistan – that had given rise to her daring to rebel.

We had begun to hear whispers of the "Mukti" and the "Mukti Bahini" by now. And apparently, our respected leaders had declared the independence of Bangladesh in one part of the country, and a government had been formed. Bangabandhu was President, Syed Nazrul was Vice President, Tajuddin was Prime Minister, and Captain Mansur, Kamruzzaman, etc. were part of the government. That's all we knew.

I sneaked a letter out to Kamal Lasker in Khadiya asking if he could come as my situation was dire. The letter had to be mailed from Nowshera. I used to visit the Boat Bridge Bazar to buy fish, so going there would not arouse any suspicion.

One Saturday evening, Kamal Lasker and Ekramullah appeared on my doorstep. Our conversation gave no sign at first that anything untoward had happened. Then, of course, it took a different turn. After we ate, we made sleeping arrangements for them where I also took refuge. After much discussion through the night, we decided that Kamal Lasker would write to me with a special signal. Then I would take Ameenah and Nabil to Khadiya. From there, we would cross the border to India.

They left on Sunday evening but there was no letter after that. Finally, the letter arrived. It said that mine fields had been planted at the Khadiya border. It would not only be difficult, but impossible, to go there with a family. I had to find another way out.

I determined after reading the letter that, indeed, I would find my own path.

I was sitting in my office one day when Faruk Iqbal entered and said, “You don’t have to teach anymore. You have been DQ-ed in writing. But, if you want, you can come and sit in the office every day, read the papers or books, and drink tea.” I realized that my world was slowly closing in. The course ended in the meantime and a few graduates were posted to Jessore while most were sent to Dhaka. Who knew where they went from there? Among those posted to Dhaka were Parvez, Ehtesham, and Azad who, with a few others, came to see me before leaving. Parvez later died in Sylhet.

How many more were to be posted to Jessore? It was just one battalion. I gave my Dhaka and Jessore home address to those posted there to help me get news. I told Azad, “I haven’t been able to send money. Would you be able to give my father three hundred taka and two hundred taka worth of rations?” Quite happily, he replied that he could. I said, “Your brother can take the money from me.” He said, “Sir, I’m very poor. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have asked for this money back.”

Ehtesham said that he would go to Crescent Jute Mill and find out if my Boro Bhai was accused of anything. Much later, when I met up with him again, he cried a lot. He wouldn’t say why he was crying. The only thing he did say was that, leave alone the Pakistani Army, he wouldn’t stay in Pakistan any longer. He would move to Canada. Later, he said, “When I inquired about your Boro Bhai at the Crescent Jute Mill, I learned that by then he had trained almost ten thousand men to fight the war. They killed about five or six thousand Biharis. Even though this was true, we spared your brother and his family simply because he’s your brother. Otherwise, there would have been a massacre. You don’t have anything to fear now. It’s almost over.”

I don’t know how true his words were but I tried to persuade him to eat with us but he refused and left. Before going, he said, “We were given three tasks to perform in East Pakistan. One, to kill all the Hindus; two, to kill all Muslim men aged fifteen to forty-five; and three, to impregnate all women aged fifteen to forty-five and burn everything. Sir, I am from Sindh. My brother is a general and that’s how I know that Bhutto and a few generals are behind this. Bhutto is a disgusting human.” Then he went on to rail about Bhutto and his generals for a while. He also narrated how the crackdowns on East Pakistan had been planned in Larkana. Bhutto hid his genocide behind the curtain of the crackdown. Genocide would be unleashed when the crackdown began so that East Pakistan was deceased.

I heard that some people had crossed the Pakistan border and gone over to join the Muktijuddho, which was in full swing. Niazi had gone and Tikka Khan had returned. Tikka was the devil and Niazi was a version of Yahya Khan. Money, wine, and women were his daily consorts in addition to his loud mouth. In spite of that, he had risen to the position of a Lieutenant General. That’s because everything is possible in this country. It was Pakistan, after all! One day, I asked Faruk Iqbal, “Has anything been heard from the GHQ? Any response on what’s happening?” He said, “No. Nothing. An aimless mission is on but Bangalis will have their freedom.”

Talat came one day – no other Bangali came to my house after that. It wasn't possible to because I was in such a position that anyone associated with me would get in trouble. Talat came to find Ameenah and I ready to go to Faruk Iqbal's house. He came and sat, even drinking a cup of tea even though it wasn't time for his tea yet. This was the time he was supposed to be drinking. He asked, "Where is your son?" I said, "He's playing outside with the batman because you're here." He said, "Shahid, don't send your son to play outside after dark. And don't go anywhere without him nor invite anyone over. Understood?" I replied, "Okay, but where did you gain such insight from?" He replied, "I have twelve brothers and sisters."

Ameenah and I laughed at this and he said, "Since you're unable to go anywhere, let me take Nabil to the club for a bit." We thought it would be okay and in the meantime, we could also finish our visit. He took Nabil and walked off. He returned quite a while later, still walking. But now both of them were swaying. I asked, "What happened?" Talat replied, "I was drinking a little and he was eating chips. Then when he wanted water, I just handed him my glass. It's better to have an early start."

I immediately snatched Nabil out his hands. But what could I do or say? Talat was a senior student.

Abba sent a letter to me through Mejho Bhai in London. The letter said nothing. He was a wise man, an experienced man and he wrote knowingly. In code, he let me know that there was no one at the Star Jute Mill or at the Crescent Jute Mill. Some were at Deyapara. Moin had left. They had received the money and rations.

I wrote back. Letters were now being allowed between East and West Pakistan. Flights operated but through Colombo. Even the army travelled via Colombo, which stood by Pakistan. They also gave their wholehearted support to the genocide in Bangladesh. Colombo recognized Bangladesh only after the death of Bangabandhu, just like China and the Middle East did. The only exception among them was Iraq. They had given recognition much earlier, and even sent a hundred million US dollars in support.

I go to work, sit at my desk, and drink tea. I read old papers if I could get hold of any because current issues were unavailable. Even Sagir lacked the courage to bring me a new paper from any of the seniors' rooms, and I had no desire to waste money in subscriptions. In the meantime, I had deactivated my provident fun and insurance. I needed money now. They hadn't stopped my salary though but how could I run away? Sayeed had been posted elsewhere, so he had left. Jahangir and Nasrullah had left as well for new posts. Faruk Iqbal was my only hope. I didn't visit him too often these days and neither did he, although he came to my office at least once a day. Akbar couldn't graduate, so he would have to return to his old home in Mirpur in Azad Kashmir. He came to see me and I said, "Let me see if I can get leave to come and visit you." He was happy to hear that.

The thought of running away from Pakistan began to take seed in my mind. How could I escape? After bidding farewell to Akbar, I thought hard. Several days passed by – it became unbearable. I had nothing to do, no work to engage in. I went to the office and came back home where it was just the three of us – Ameenah, Nabil, and me. Once, I couldn't help myself and said to Ameenah, "You and Nabil should go back to Dhaka." Immediately, Ameenah responded with, "No. Never. I will never leave you here. If we die, we'll die together." I said, "Where did you get the idea of dying, Ameenah?"

She didn't say anything else. I knew she was anxious. She would secretly cry for Anis. I thought to myself how two lives were affected because of my one. We had bought a tricycle for Nabil. He spoke Pashtu with the batman, and Urdu outside the home. With his friends, he spoke Punjabi. He also understood our mother tongue, Bangla, and English. He was just starting to recognize letters.

A month passed by. I heard that Faruk Iqbal was going to Murree. His parents lived there. He would see them and return in a couple of days. Then he dropped the bomb – he had been posted to Jessore. He had been well aware of what was going on and understood the situation. His battalion commander, Kiyani, was in Dhaka now. Who knows how many people he had beaten up by now?

I took leave – for seven days. We went to Pindi to Major Mozammel's house. I left the car at the Engineers' Mess and took a taxi there. As soon as Ameenah and Nabil alighted from the taxi, Major Mozammel ushered them in and took them upstairs, telling me to sit in the living room downstairs. I entered to find Major Ziauddin sitting there with his hand in his hands. He didn't reply when I greeted him. Then suddenly, he looked up and asked loudly, "Why have you come here?" Without thinking, I said, "I'm going home tomorrow and we came to spend the night here."

"What do you mean by going home?"

I said, "I'm escaping with my family."

Ziauddin exploded. "Don't you dare say such a thing! I'm warning you!"

I asked, "Why are you getting mad?"

He said, "Just shut up. Don't even speak of this to Mozammel."

I shut up. Mozammel returned to the living room and when he told me to, I went upstairs. He and Ziauddin remained downstairs. It was a while before he came upstairs again. We ate dinner and chatted for a while. Mozammel was a very good man. I said, "We're going to Murree for a couple of days, although I have leave for seven." Major Mozammel said, "Good. Go ahead."

Chapter Fifteen

To Murree – with an Escape Plan

We ate breakfast the next morning and headed straight to Murree by bus. I had already booked the East Pakistan House for seven days – the goal: to disappear from there. As soon as we alighted in Murree, two men came forward and asked, "Are you Major Shahid?"

I acquiesced and they said they were with the field intelligence unit. They got rid of the coolie and began to handle our luggage themselves. Then they said, "Come sir. You'll be staying at the East Pakistan House. I asked, "How did you guys get involved in this?" One of them replied, "Sir, we have been asked to keep an eye on you so that you don't run away."

I felt like a balloon whose air had been let out. Indeed, could the Pakistan army sit back and suck its thumb while one major out of the four hundred thousand men in the army ran off to East Pakistan through India? Of the four hundred thousand, there were a few Bangali majors, some lieutenant colonels, two colonels, two brigadiers, one major general and one lieutenant general; there were about a thousand officers and thirty thousand soldiers. It wasn't at all difficult to keep an eye on such a few people.

There was no option but to listen to these men. We were given a very nice room at the rest house. I was anxious as I drank my tea. Nabil didn't want to stay indoors, but when I tried to take him outside, I found those two men standing there. After lunch, we went to Faruk's father's house. Faruk was very happy. We were introduced to his three mothers. His youngest mother was even younger than Faruk. Ameenah found female company and Rahila after a long time, and I was taken by Faruk to be introduced to his father. The gentleman said, "I've heard much about you. You're a good officer, I hear. But we can't really talk much about what's happening in this country now. What will be, will be." But then, he couldn't stop himself and said, "You see, this country won't remain one anymore. That's what Bhutto wants. He has chosen this way to separate the land but he's told the generals that it will remain together. If this country remains united, then Bhutto can't be Prime Minister. And Bangladesh is not in any way pleading to remain part of Pakistan either."

We all had lunch together. Rahila and Ameenah chatted to their hearts' content, and then we returned to the East Pakistan House in the evening. We set off by bus a day later. Two men came to see us off while two FIU men were introduced to us: "Sir, these men will look after you."

As if they were being so respectful!

We took a taxi in Pindi to Major Mozammel's house again. I left Ameenah and Nabil there to go to the mess. There I found that my car was missing. I was told that the car had been requisitioned for the EME pool. After some searching, I found the car and returned with it to Mozammel's. As we had lunch, Major Mozammel said, "Ziauddin, Manzoor and one other man have run away through Shialkot." I asked, "When?" He replied, "The day after the night you stayed here." Excited, I asked, "Sir, what else can I do to escape?" He said, "Listen, Shahid, it's difficult. All the Bangali officers, especially majors and above, are under surveillance. It would be difficult for them to escape. I'm not even sure about those who have supposedly run away. How did they go? Who sent them? I still think they have been sent with some briefing. It's a huge conspiracy. They're recruiting Pakistan loyalists from within Bangladesh to infiltrate the Muktijuddho."

His words gave me pause. I asked, “What are you saying? What do you mean by who’s sending them? Who’s doing this or having it done?”

Mozammel was with the intelligence. He grew silent. As we had our tea, I told him about my experience in Murree. Not surprised at all, he said, “You won’t be able to escape, but you could have done so in the dead of night if you lived in a border town. Or if you had moved there much earlier on. How can you escape after taking leave? There’s no chance now.”

Then we talked for a while about Ameenah’s friend, Sophie. In the evening, a couple of officers dropped by – none of them Bangali. The Bangalis had stopped visiting. Mozammel was a graduate of the Military College of Engineering. Manzoor was a junior friend of his. There were so many times that the two of them visited my home in Risalpur. They would tell me beforehand that they wanted to eat fish from the Kabul River. We would chat a lot – Manzoor, especially, was a very good talker. His words were fraught with laughter, jokes, and humor. He was a brilliant and worthy officer.

We stayed the night at Mozammel’s. I played a lot with Nabil in the evening on the spacious lawn. It was summer and very hot. In the morning, after breakfast, we headed back to Risalpur. Faruk Iqbal came two days later. He was going to East Pakistan and there was a farewell party in his honor.

Our lives had become devoid of parties. I used to have so many parties at my home before. So many officers visited, even on Eid day. There would be parathas, meat, and kababs. The Bangali officers ate and enjoyed themselves. And now the house stood in darkness. Only one light and one fan were turned on in the bedroom. Before he left, Faruk Iqbal promised to write. He did, actually, and it included two lines about Kiyani. Apparently, the loud-mouthed Kiyani didn’t leave home or office now without two guards. And he thought he saw “Muktis” everywhere. He was sure they would kill him at any moment! Azraeel[51] stalked him constantly. The letter was written humorously in beautiful English. He had visited my home in Jessore and spoken with my father, but he didn’t mention the whereabouts of my family members.

I never got another letter from him.

Azad had come to see me in the meantime. He had kept his word.

I was sitting in my office one day, a little later than usual, when around one-thirty, a jeep came to stand at my door, a pickup van behind it. A few soldiers alighted from the pickup and a captain from the jeep. I didn’t recognize them. The captain entered my office and saluted. I asked him to sit but instead, he handed me a letter. I had been posted to Lahore to the Three Engineers Battalion, Eleven Division. As soon as I finished reading the letter, he said, “Sir, you have to come with us right now.” I said, “That’s not possible!”

He repeated, “No, sir. That’s how it is. We will take you home now and you will pack a few necessities. The train leaves at three, but it will wait if we’re late. I’m responsible for you until you get on the train. We have guards with us, of course, so there’s no need to worry.”

There was nothing left for me to say. I drove home and they followed me. They refused to go into the house with me. I packed a large handbag with a two or three sets of uniforms, walking shoes, night clothes, and a couple of other items. Ameenah was cleaning Nabil’s poop when I went to tell her of my posting.

[51] The Angel of Death

She hadn't noticed anything of what was happening. So I told her, "I'm going to Lahore. Right now. They're here to take me. I will tell you everything once I get there." Nabil began to cry at this moment and Ameenah became busy with him. To me, she simply said, "Ok, go. Send money on time." This was the first time since our marriage that Ameenah had asked for money.

I sat in the jeep while the captain sat in the back and we drove off. The pickup followed. We arrived at Nowshera station to find the train waiting. I was escorted into a first class compartment. The entire compartment was empty. After I sat there, some people did begin to arrive. The captain said, "Sir, Subedar shaheb will accompany you, along with some soldiers. Your food will be seen to by the subedar. I believe you haven't eaten yet. There is food here. It will be served immediately."

"Wish you good luck," he said as he got off the train. The train chugged off. I couldn't think anymore. What was happening? Where were they taking me? What sort of posting was this in September? The war would be ending any moment (I believed that Bangladesh would emerge and that could happen any time). I slept intermittently with these thoughts swirling in my brain. We were on a mail train so there must have been stops, but I didn't notice. At five in the morning, I saw that we had arrived at Lahore Station. I was escorted off the train in that huge station by the subedar and his men. I was handed over to another subedar from the Three Engineers' Battalion. He said, "Sir, the car is ready. Let's go. I said, "My sister lives here. Can we go to her place?" He replied, "No, sir."

I began to say, "Then …"

He interrupted, "Sir, we're going to Kasur."

I asked, "Why Kasur?"

He replied, "Sir, the Battalion has moved to Kasur."

Then I told him, "Then I must buy some things."

The subedar responded, "That's not possible, sir. My orders are to take you to the Battalion Headquarters in Kasur. I've heard that you used to live there."

I realized that I had been tricked into coming here. There was something fishy going on here that I couldn't quite place my finger on. Still, I said, "Ok, let's go." To myself, I thought, "I must retain my dignity and hold my head up high." I should have shaved on the train though. But I knew that even in death, one should always hold one's head up high.

Chapter Sixteen

Imprisoned in a Dark Bunker

We reached Kasur before too long. The subedar ordered one of the men to take my bag and he moved forward with me. In simple terms, the place I had been brought to was a small forest. The subedar saluted and left me standing in front of a tent. Before me stood a large man – heavily built, completely bald – the CO Colonel Rashid Malik. He got up from his chair and I felt as though a mountain loomed in front of me. Before I could approach him though, he came forward and embraced me. When this torture was over, I saluted him and he asked me to sit. He also sat down. He began, "I've heard a lot about you. You were a good officer in this battalion. I've also seen your work. Do you know why you've been posted here?"

I replied, "No, sir."

He explained, "I heard that you built the Defence Tower here?"

I said, "Yes, sir. I did."

Before I could finish, he spoke, "All of that is gone." He burst out into loud laughter, a sound that resonated like a bomb to me. He stopped laughing and said, "Your job is to now search for all that is lost."

I was wondering where the tower would have vanished when he began to laugh again. Then he said, "Forget about those things now. I've been waiting here to have tea with you."

A little later, the tea and snacks arrived – there were shingaras[52] and kababs. There was no shortage of anything here. The last meal I had was at seven on the previous evening and now it was ten in the morning. Without much ado, I wolfed down two of the stuffed shingaras. He also had two along with two kababs. He persuaded me to eat two kababs too. After we were done, he said, "There's a good lunch as well." Then he proceeded to list all the items on the menu. I used to think that I was the only foodie around but who knew this man was an even bigger one? We had tea, the colonel drinking two cups. Now he wanted to know if I was married. He asked where my wife and son was. I replied, "One of my two sons is here, the other is in Dhaka."

He was surprised. "What? What will happen to them?"

I said, "Well, I have left them behind."

He asked, "Did you tell anyone anything before you came?"

I raised my hands upwards and replied, "Yes, to Allah."

Even at this, he laughed – as if he was quite amused by our plight. And then he continued to chat and ask innumerable questions that went on for quite some time. It tired me out. Finally, I said, "Sir, I understand my job here, but where am I supposed to do it – at the headquarters or the Company or elsewhere?"

He said, "Tomorrow I'll see where I can fit you in."

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[52] Triangular pastries stuffed with vegetables and spices

At lunchtime, I accompanied him and saw that there was a forestry rest house, a very old building. I have seen a lot of Kasur but I had never seen this place. This is where Rashid Malik lived. The building had two or three bedrooms, a drawing room and a dining room. We ate together and I was given a room where, for the time being, I settled in.

In the afternoon, he summoned me to go on a walk with him through the forest, almost the entire forest. I couldn't understand where the battalion was. We had dinner together and then I went to sleep after some conversation.

The commander of the Twenty-One Company, Major Lodi, came one day. He had been in Jessore all this time and had returned about a week ago. An aggressive man, he hated Bangalis. In his eyes, I was to blame for being a Bangali. The CO himself was forced to cut him short when he noticed his aggressive behavior. He told us that the Bangalis had murdered Major Sadek, hung him on a bamboo pole and exhibited him on their shoulders.

Major Sadek was known to me as a very good officer. I was deeply shocked to hear about this incident; later, though I learned that Major Sadek was alive. After a meal, Major Lodi left for his company. Very gravely, the CO said, "He has killed many in Jessore. Be careful." Without another word, he went to his room.

For the next few days, I wandered around Kasur like an untethered cow with a car borrowed from the 91 Field Company. It was an old place for me. There were mostly gardens and agricultural land here and the population was low. I met up with Saudi Arabia-returned Mowla Bhai and with Ekramullah as well.

One evening after we had eaten, the CO went into his room with the mail and I went to mine. Soon, I heard a knock on my door. The CO stood was there. He said, "Shahid, you must leave for the 91 Field Company now." I asked, "Do I know where the company is?" He said, "You'll be escorted there. You'll stay there as the Company Commander and lead them to the border. That order will come later. But you need to leave now. You have to be there tonight."

I packed and went with the subedar. The OC's tent was ready – apparently, that's where I would stay.

After explaining everything outside, the subedar entered the tent with me. There was a rattan bed with sheets and a pillow; an army stool; a clotheshorse; and a table. Sitting on the stool, I addressed the subedar, "Everything looks ok." He replied, "The Company is ok too." Then, as if it suddenly occurred to him, he said, "My name is Saabdar Ali."

His name struck a chord. I know that Pathans usually have Khan in their name somewhere, but I waited silently for him to continue. He said, "My son, Ali Ahmed, is your student. He was at MCE."

I replied, "Yes, I know him. He's doing well."

The subedar said, "He spoke about you a lot whenever he came home – what you taught, how you taught, what you said, how you made them laugh, and other such stories. Everyone knows your name at our home."

Later, I learned that he had been a soldier since the British era. He had been in Comilla during the Second World War and liked East Pakistan – although East Pakistan had still not come into existence then. He hadn't been there since the Partition.

I listened to him but was wary about commenting. I didn't want to prolong the conversation. So I said, "Subedar Shaheb, you may leave now." To this, he said he would eat now and then go to the unit to check on everything. After that, he would return. He asked me to go to bed now.

After he left, I changed into my sleeping suit. I turned up the lamp and took out my copy of *War and Peace* to read in bed. I must have fallen asleep at one point because the book fell to the floor. I didn't feel like getting off the bed to recover it but I leaned over and had just reached for the book when suddenly, there was a gunshot. The source and target of a gunshot is impossible to locate at first but I realized that I had fallen to the floor by now. I got up slowly and saw that the bullet had passed through my pillow. Had I not leaned over to get the book, my head would have been blown to pieces! A cold shiver ran down my spine and I stood there, numb. There was noise outside, people rushing about. The subedar was probably standing somewhere close by. He rushed in and checked on me first. Then, on questioning the guards outside my tent, it was discovered that seeing a snake entering my tent, a Pathan soldier had shot at it. But the snake had escaped.

Even though they were speaking in their own tongue, I had no trouble figuring out what happened. I remained inside the tent. Saabdar Ali entered a few minutes later. That's when I heard the sound of a jeep approaching. The CO had arrived. He asked questions loudly to hear the same story about the snake.

The CO entered my tent and looking at me, he began to laugh out loudly. And there I was, my life in my hands! I didn't know what there was to laugh about. Still laughing, he said, "There are snakes here. It would be best not to stay here." I should leave with him immediately. My batman was a Bangali. He was crying. The subedar summoned him and instructed him to pack everything. I was about to get dressed when the CO said, "There's no need. Let's go."

He brought me to his headquarters close by. I sat and had some tea. But now he wasn't laughing anymore. Rather, he looked worried. I didn't ask questions but shortly, he said, "Shahid, go to bed. Let me think about this for a bit and inform the divisional headquarters about the incident."

I tried to forget what happened.

Up till now I hadn't met any officer from the battalion except Lodi and I had seen nothing of the battalion company either. It's possible I would detect something if I met anyone. Everyone has an inner eye that can see hidden thoughts. So I stopped asking what I was supposed to do. Rather, the question was what would they do to me? When would they do it? Where would it happen? Would they take me up the tower and push me off it? Who knew?

The next morning, the CO took me along when he went to the office. I sat in his room and tried to read a book or even the paper that had come in. But I couldn't concentrate. I had been sending money and letters to Risalpur, but except for one, I received no other reply. How was Ameenah? And Nabil? What about Anis in Dhaka? And my in-laws? How were my parents, my siblings in Jessore? And how was the Bangladesh of my dreams? When would there be independence? I knew it was bound to happen – the CO had indicated as much. There was no radio, no television, so I had no way to get news. The CO came in

and we had tea together. Then he left again. Whenever he came for lunch, he would take me with him. When he didn't, I went to lunch by myself.

Suddenly, one evening, after our meal, the CO said, "Shahid, the battalion has moved to the front last night. Your company has also gone. A car is coming to pick you up. Get ready to go."

For the first time, I objected, "Sir, can't I go tomorrow morning?"

He too, for the first time, replied quite rudely, "No. You must go now." Then he went into his room and slammed the door.

I got in the car when it arrived. A havildar sat next to me – I didn't know him. The driver too us up to the BRB Canal. I knew the roads from here. The Kasur roads were familiar but everything was eerily calm. A half hour later, the car took a right turn. Soon, we took another right turn into what looked like a guava grove. Some groves here stretched on for a mile – and they were like forests. There were orange, guava, and now, mango groves as well. The car drove on for some more time after turning right, and then stopped. We alighted and a subedar came forward to meet us. Subedar Saabdar Ali, a soldier from the British era, so he spoke English well. Some of the conversation was in Urdu too. He said, "Sir, come." A few steps ahead, I saw what looked like a deep well. The subedar began to scale down the wall of this well. I halted abruptly. The subedar called to me, and I began to climb down after him. After climbing down for a few feet in darkness, the subedar said, "Sir, this is your bunker." My head was bowed – the bunker's height was about five feet.

I had never been to the front during a war, so I thought an unfinished bunker at the front must look like this. I had constructed so many concrete bunkers at Kasur. Each was eight feet high and 3-4 feet below ground level. Someone had a lamp. He went forward to show me my bed, a simple rattan affair. There was a chair, and nothing else. The subedar said, "Sir, you can shower in a corner of that spot from where we descended. And your commode is here, covered by this piece of jute." He lit a candle and placed it on the floor. Then he asked, "Sir, have you eaten yet?" I said, "Yes." He then said, "Sir, get some rest. Your breakfast, lunch, and dinner will be served to you here. You are not to leave this place." Now I realized that I would not be ordering my own food – the subedar would do that. And I became even more sure when he told me not to leave this place.

The entire area was in darkness, save the area lighted by the candle. I changed into sleeping clothes and left everything else packed. And even if I unpacked, where would I keep my things? I sat on the bed for some time and then lay down. There were a few blankets, so I covered myself in them. I said some prayers and closed my eyes, trying to sleep, but each time I saw Nabil's face, Ameenah's face, Anis's face, all the faces from Dhaka and Jessore. I wondered where Rashid Malik had sent me and why.

At some point, I did fall asleep. There was no way to tell if it was morning. It was dark all around. Footsteps approached. The man carrying my breakfast held a flashlight under his arm. There were two homemade *rotis* and a mug of tea on a plate. The man put the plate down without a word and left. I got up and lit the candle. I dipped the bread in the hot tea and ate, gradually finishing the tea. When I stood up, I banged my head badly on the ceiling and sat down quickly, cradling my head. I felt around to make sure my head hadn't busted open. It hadn't, but it had swollen up like a crabapple. I got up slowly and went to feel for the bathwater, which was like ice! I couldn't possibly bathe with this, even though I usually

showered twice a day. I finished my job on the Thunderbox and then somewhat washed my face with a bit of the water. I used as little water as I possibly could. Then I pulled the blankets over myself and lay down again. I held my watch to the candle – it was a cheap watch and showed neither the date nor the day. It was eight o'clock. My mind swirled with odd thoughts. I snuffed out the candle to preserve it – in case they didn't give me a new one.

Alone in the dark, thoughts of my childhood, my youth surfaced. I was but thirty-one years old now, still young. Hadn't I swum across the Rupsha River just the other day? And the Kabul River as well? I had trekked up thirteen thousand feet of the Titwala Mountain.

Footsteps approaching once again told me it was afternoon and time for lunch – two pieces of bread and some *dal*, accompanied by a mug of water. I lighted the candle, sat on the bed and lifted the plate off the floor, but the food wouldn't go down my throat. Still, I forced myself to eat one piece of bread with the *dal*. I also drank the entire mug of water slowly.

Dinner arrived at six pm. The plate contained *roti* and *dal* – perhaps it was the same *dal* from lunch. Maybe this is how it was on the battlefield. There was also a mug of water from which I saved a little in case I could somehow manage to shave the next morning.

It was dark. I had no idea when I slept, or woke, or slept again. I would awaken at every little sound as if my ears were constantly on alert. I didn't need to call or be called. There was no sound here. I placed my mirror on top of my suitcase and wet my cheeks with the water from the previous night. In the dim light of the candle, I felt around and managed to shave. Then I lay down again, jumping up the next minute. I thought I should take a walk along the wall, even though walking hunchbacked would be difficult. Still I thought I should. After some time, I realized that my candle would run out, so I blew it out and lay down. Did Ameenah receive all my letters? Why hadn't she replied? Did she get the money? And if she didn't, how was she managing? I thought of asking the subedar if he could send my salary. Men at the front could be paid in cash if they requested it.

I tried to pass the time thinking about different odd things and then lay down again, tired. I walked a little or tried to. There was nothing else for me to do. No one said anything to me and the subedar didn't visit. I wondered if I was a prisoner – and if I were, then why here? They could have sent me to jail – but I hadn't done anything to warrant it. I was never into politics, having always been busy with work. I had a happy life and never really known any pain. Why was this happening to me? I think a few days had passed by – I couldn't keep track of the day or date. I was living underground, within the earth, eating dry bread and *dal*.

With the light of the candle, I had tried one day to see what was above me. There was earth over the roots of a tree. What else was there? I couldn't see anymore because I had to scramble down when the guard yelled at me. My head felt empty and sometimes I saw Ameenah, Nabil, and Anis's faces floating around me in a cloud. I didn't want to think but in my mind's eye, I kept seeing the faces of my family members. I stopped eating too, except for the morning tea, which I gulped down. I couldn't even recognize the roti and dal anymore. One day – it might have been night – I don't know what came over me but I got up from my bed and began to strike my head against the wall and punching with my fists. Then I fell to the bed and lost consciousness. I don't remember anything after that. When I woke up again, I saw my breakfast and lunch strewn across the floor. My whole body felt numb and my head throbbed. I didn't get up.

Suddenly one day, the subedar appeared – with two armed men. One held a lamp, the other a flashlight. I sat up in bed as they entered. I don't know why but I began to scream. I kept shouting, "Subedar shaheb, shoot me in the chest. Give me Bangladesh and shoot me!"

The subedar was taken aback by my screams. He told the armed men to go outside, and then approached me with the flashlight. He said, "Sir, I told you I am Ali Ahmed's father. My name is Mir Saabdar Ali. I fought in the Second World War and I am a Pathan. I have been tasked with keeping you safe. You're my son's teacher and he speaks about you all the time when he comes home. Just you. I never wanted to see you in a position like this. I'm a recalled officer. I was living peacefully but I was brought in to do this dirty work. Please know that if I live, so will you. This is my CO's order. I don't know or care what anyone else does or will do."

I didn't say anything. The subedar spoke again, "Sir, I will be taking you to the front this evening. Please put on your uniform and be ready."

I lay down again after he left. My brain seemed to be working again and I could think a little. I got up and changed – pulled on my boots and wore my beret. I hadn't been given any weapons though. The subedar returned and handed me a pistol, which I put on. I was taken out of that dark cave and when we came up, I saw a jeep waiting with a guard. The subedar sat in the back and I in the front. I felt better after a long time – my seniority was still being respected. The subedar said, "Sir, are you planning to grow a beard?" I felt my cheeks and realized that there was a bush there. I didn't respond to him. The jeep moved on past the BRB Canal. We arrived at the Satadru River. I knew this area. The jeep drove into the water and out, having to drive upwards for quite a while. It was too dark to see anything. It felt like sand below us. Gradually, the jeep drove into a large field of catkins through which there seemed to be some sort of path. After driving on for some time, the jeep halted and the subedar asked me to get down. We all did and the subedar pointed to a guard post and said, "This is Butiya. India lies on the other side and we are on this side. There is a post on the other side and in between is the No-Man's-Land. You see those tiny lights? That's Mamdot Village, named after the aristocratic Pakistani family of the same name. You must have heard of them? They came from that area in '47."

He then asked the jeep to turn around and we sat inside again. The lights were turned off all the way to Satadru.

I have no idea why the subedar took me on this but I was grateful to be outside to breathe the air and see the sky.

Then I was back inside that dark bunker, the horrific days drifting by slowly. I'm not sure what happened one day when I decided to move the jute covering aside and climb up the stairs. There was no guard outside. It took me a while but I got up and stood outside. After some time, I realized that the company tent stood somewhere to the distance. Everyone must be in there or in this guava grove. I went down to the bunker and picked up the pistol. My brain was beginning to function now. I wondered what was happening – the last time I tried to go up, I had been blocked by the guard. Why was there no one here today?

Did the subedar want me to shoot myself in the head with the pistol he had given me? Even if he did, I wouldn't do it – it wasn't part of my religion. I wouldn't kill anyone, nor would I kill myself. I made this

promise and lay down on the bed. I lost myself to everything again and stopped eating. I couldn't eat, I couldn't think. The subedar appeared one day and said, "Sir, get ready. Put on your uniform. Our battalion and company have moved to the front last night. There's going to be war." For the first time, he stated, "Mashreki Pakistan will gain independence. We're going to plant mine fields. That's why we're taking you along."

I asked, "Subedar Shaheb, what month and day is it?"

He said, "Sir, it's November the 29th."

I asked, "Who told you there's going to be war?"

He replied, "The real war has begun in East Pakistan. All the Muktis are there and India has invaded from the north. Yahya Khan will attempt to fight from this side to see if anything can be done. But sir, if he does fight, he'll lose miserably. We have no shoes, no ties, no clothes. We don't have the proper weapons or gunpowder. No money. And most of all, no desire to fight. What will they fight for, sir? Has India attacked us? And they are paying for what the West Pakistanis have done to the East Pakistanis."

He left suddenly after this tirade. I felt as though my head was working again and I could think. I was so happy but I couldn't express it. I lit my candle and got out my mirror, my razor, and my shaving cream. I dipped my hand in the bucket and rubbed my cheeks with the water but felt no cold. I struck at my beard wildly and cut it off. Then, taking the razor, I shaved myself clean. It gave me some pain, but I took the Savlon out and wiped my entire face with it a couple of times with my hands. In the candlelight, I realized that I was bleeding a little, so I took some cottonwool and rubbed my face with it. I kept my hands pressed together so no one would notice. Then I got dressed. Tea came in the meantime. I looked at my watch – the time was almost four in the morning. The subedar came and escorted me to the same jeep along the same path to BRB and Sutlej River.

We stopped right as we reached Butiya. There was no power. The subedar said, "Our platoons are placed to the right and left. There is one at our back too. We're going to plant the mines, sir. I will go from the right to the left over there. Let me do the recce first, then I will take you. It will take some time. You will remain behind Butiya so that they don't see you. There is an Indian post where the OP is situated. They won't do anything, sir. They're a very disciplined army, sir."

The subedar left with the guard. I stood alone, looking around in the dark. The grass was tall – the subedar had said there were pigs in the grass as well by the turn of the river that stood a little way from India. There were also antelopes or nilgai here. We didn't eat pigs and they didn't eat antelopes, so the pigs lived here and the antelopes over there. The antelopes ate grass as well as catkins and the pigs ate roots. I waited to see if any pigs would approach. Dawn had begun to break by this time, but in spite of the light, a darkness seemed to overwhelm me. I sat down and leaned against the guard post. I thought that if they shot me, they would hit my face. What would the Pakistanis say to that? That I was running away and the Indians shot me. That's why they had hit my face. I turned my back so that they would hit me from behind if they shot but I would still appear to be running away and that's why the Pakistanis shot me. Suddenly, I wondered what all this meant – did the CO want me to escape? Perhaps. Otherwise, why did they show me the border the other night and then remove the guard? Why did the subedar now leave me here in the

middle of the night and go off? There was only one answer. But I would never do that. My country would gain independence. And I wouldn't run away without Ameenah and Nabil.

Then I grew selfish. Let me escape first. I take a couple of steps forward and then back. Then I step forward again. There were no Indian soldiers here, at least I couldn't see any. There were just farmlands. There was the Mamdot village – all I had to do was go there.

I was struggling with my dilemma when suddenly a convoy drove up. A number of men got down from the cars. There was the Major General Div Commander! With him were General Malek, 21 Brigade Commander, Colonel Staff. There was the CO Rashid Malik with several others with him. The GOC said, "Go. See where the mine fields should be planted. This is Major Shahid, a friend of mine. We used to play cards and work together. Let me chat with him for a bit."

When everyone left the immediate vicinity, General Malek looked at me severely and said, "What are you doing?!" I said, "Sir, I'm here to plant mine fields." He barked, "Stop your nonsense! Why haven't you escaped? Why haven't you run away? Who's going to save you?"

I said, "Sir, I'm a married man. How can I run away without my wife and son?" "What? What are you saying?" He spoke in Urdu.

I replied, "Sir, I have a son."

"What? Where? With whom?"

I told him. He asked, "Who's in Risalpur?" I said, "Brigadier Ershad."

"Oh – that pretty one! He's gay! He did this?"

Then he said, "You must go to Lahore right now. Buy tickets for your wife and son, then go to Risalpur. Bring them with you to your sister's place. Don't contact anyone or talk to anyone. Don't go to the cantonment. You will see them off in the plane. If you can, call someone in Dhaka to pick them up from the airport, but they shouldn't go home. Have them taken elsewhere. Then you will come back here. And you'll stay at this bunker. The subedar will bring you here some night. Then you'll escape. Repeat what I said."

I did and he said, "Good." Then he called Colonel Rashid Malik and said, "You will call Brigadier Ershad at Risalpur MCE and tell him that I have ordered Shahid to bring his wife and child."

I had to interrupt, "Sir, today is …"

"Okay. Tomorrow. He will bring them tomorrow. He should be given a truck or car or whatever he needs. Shahid will go in the morning. Will his family fight if they stay in Risalpur? Let him bring them to Lahore and then return to the front to fight or plant mine fields."

He left as soon as he finished. The subedar arrived with the car right after. Everyone had been nearby – no one had left. They had been keeping an eye on me. Things were slowly becoming clear – one group wanted to save me while the other wanted to murder me. But I couldn't tell which was which. I believed my saviors were the GOC, CO, and subedar. That's why no other officer except Tofazzal had been sent to the company – the tall, large Tofazzal – my student, who had barely passed – but I didn't get to see

him. The subedar had told me of him. Once we got in the car, the subedar said, “Will you go to Lahore right now?” I replied, “No. I want to go to the bunker first, and then to Lahore.”

I took a couple of items of clothing from the bunker and, still in my uniform, I set off for Lahore, where I bought tickets from the air booth in Gulbagh. However, there were no available seats until the fifth. I called my father-in-law and told him that Ameenah was coming to Dhaka on the fifth with Nabil who was ill. I instructed him to take them from the airport to Mitford. The smart man quickly caught on and did not question my cryptic instructions.

I then went to my sister, Hasnu’s house at the Staff College. Hers was the better house in this neighborhood, a two-storey building. They had a large compound but the entire Staff College was like a garden. Hasnu was upset that I never wrote to her or called her to see how she was doing. Then she told me all she knew.

I set off that very night by bus around ten pm. When I saw Nabil and Ameenah at Risalpur, all I could think was had they been living in a German Nazi camp or were they prisoners of the Japanese? What a state Ameenah was in!

The two of them rushed into my arms as soon as they saw me and began to cry. Tears flowed freely and it took a while for everyone to become normal again. Nabil was in my arms but he couldn’t hold his head up and Ameenah had lost half her weight. After I calmed down, I said, “We’re going to Lahore and you’ll stay at Hasnu’s.”

Ameenah, taken aback, asked, “Right now? Everything’s ready. An army truck came this morning. The men who came in it took care of our belongings. But why didn’t you write for so long? Why didn’t you send money?”

Now I was stunned. “What are you talking about? I wrote letter after letter even until a month ago. And I sent money as well.”

Ameenah said, “I never got anything!”

“Forget it now. When did you know I was coming?”

She said, “Yesterday. Major Azma’s men came to inform me. No one else has visited since you left. Not even Mujib next door. That’s how I spent the last three months.”

I swiftly put Ameenah’s and Nabil’s two suitcases and a small bag of mine into the car. I filled up the tank but when I went to start the car, the ignition refused to turn on. It needed to be pushed. Everything appeared to be normal here – as though nothing had happened – there was no sign of war here. We drove across the boat bridge over the Kabul River, crossed through Nowshera, then Akora Khattak. Even when we reached Pindi, I avoided meeting anyone. We ate somewhere on the way and Ameenah bought a few things for Nabil. Then we went on our way. We reached Lahore just as the evening drew to a close and Hasnu’s house just after dark. Hasnu knew we were coming. Her husband, Dr. Ali Ahmed was a serious, bookish man, an academic. His books were taught in different places. He spoke less of politics, and more of political science. Hasnu’s daughter was a pretty little girl. Nabil, by now, had gained some of his strength. He had finally been released from being imprisoned.

Ameenah told me a lot of things on the way. She had even cried at times. She had received neither letters nor money ever since I had left Risalpur. The money she had with her was soon spent. She could go nowhere – it was against the law – so she had to remain confined to the house. Still, one day, she had gone to a senior Bangali officer in the air force and found herself crying, in an attempt to get news of me. He understood what was going on, and later sent over some supplies. Talat came a few times and brought some food. He would take Nabil out as well. And then there was Monsur Afzal. They were all students and their courses were almost complete. Ameenah used to listen to the radio but its batteries soon died. There was no letter from anywhere. Lieutenant Manzoor had visited after I had left. He had told her that her brother, Reza, had joined the Muktijuddho. He had come home for one night but the military got word of it and came to take him away. He was in jail now. Other than these people, no one else came to check on her. Not one single Bangali.

We were given a room on the top floor of Dr. Ali Ahmed's house and we soon went to sleep. Everything was running smoothly at this house but Hasnu was feeling the effects of the war, even though she didn't show it.

The next morning, December 3, the newspaper headlines caught my eye – all flights to East Pakistan had been cancelled. I said nothing, but I went out after ten o'clock, returned the tickets and got my money back. That was the advantage of being in uniform. They didn't look too closely at who was Bangali, who was Pakistani.

We were resting after lunch when a jeep suddenly drew up to the house. There were two guards and one havildar in the jeep. I knew it was time for me to go. We set off. It was almost dark by the time we arrived at Kasur. As we approached BRB, the sky lighted up and we heard a loud noise.

On the way, I had seen many families leaving Kasur – in trucks, tractors, buffalo carts, bull carts, walking. I was wondering what had happened to the Kasur Fortress – everything was burning around us. There was artillery fire. Pakistan was burning like a funeral pyre. We turned to the right with the BRB on our left on to that same road through the guava grove. But I didn't see the subedar. I was taken to the same bunker which I entered. The only thing the havildar said was that my food would arrive in the evening. I thought I saw some pitched tents in the distance.

I had no light, but I found my way to the bed and lit a candle. I changed into my sleeping clothes and lay down. My bed was shaking. There was a booming noise coming from somewhere but I could see nothing. Later on, I realized that the war had begun. I suddenly wanted to laugh out loud. I pulled the blankets over me and laughed to myself for a while. I could think of nothing now except find peace at the thought the Bangladesh was emerging.

Slowly, I calmed down and stopped laughing. I felt strong in body and mind. I ate my dinner when it came, and went to bed. I was extremely tired. Let them fight – what was it to me?

The next morning, I was so surprised to see a poached egg with my bread at breakfast that I had to ask, "What is this?" The jawan who brought me the food said, "The subedar's orders." I ate the bread and egg with relish, and drank my tea. There was no noise now and my days passed by in this manner. I could remember many things now, like it was the 4th today. On the night of the 6th, there was a sudden loud noise and I fell off my bed in fear. I couldn't tell if it was an earthquake or something else. I got up on to the

bed again. The havildar came in with my breakfast and informed me that India had dropped a few bombs and rockets very close by. But none of them had blasted except one in the distance. He asked if I was okay and I replied, “I’m splendid!” He replied, “*Bahut accha*” and left.

I began to feel rather ecstatic.

Chapter Seventeen

Out of the Bunker

It was December 9, nearly one am. I felt as though someone had entered my bunker. I wasn't wrong. It was the CO's driver who silently handed me a piece of paper. The message – in English – said, "Shahid, I have sent my driver and jeep. Pack everything and come. The driver will take you to Lahore and then you must hide. Don't go to the cantonment. Do what the driver tells you. And it would be best if you swallow this message up. If you can't, then tear it into pieces and burn it with the candle flame. Place the candle under the bed when you do."

The message was clear. I also swallowed up the message in front of the driver. The driver left and I packed swiftly. I came out to find only an empty jeep standing there. When I sat in the jeep, the subedar appeared from nowhere. I was in no position to speak. The driver got in and started the car. Then the subedar said, "Good luck, sir." I could only shake his hand. The jeep drove off. For a while as we drove along the BRB, the driver kept the lights turned off. Intermittently, he warned, "Sir, guards ahead" and I would get off the jeep. Then, creeping through the cropfields, I would move past the guards and get back into the jeep. This happened three or four times. There was no more trouble after we got on the road to Kasur.

We arrived in Lahore and the guard let us in to Hasnu's house as soon as we knocked on the gate. The driver unloaded my suitcase and took his leave. I looked down at myself and realized that I was covered in mud upto my chest – the result of crawling through the fields. I looked strange. There was no way for me to get clean now, so I knocked gently on the door. No one answered for a while. I was starting to worry when Ameenah herself opened the door. Blandly, she said, "We're hiding under the stairs. Don't you dare enter the house this way…there is a bench over there. Sit there and take everything off, and then come inside. Otherwise, just stay there. Do you think you're a circus clown?"

I've seen many war movies, but I have never seen a loved one give such an off-hand welcome to a man who's been gone for a long time! A man had returned home after eons and instead of welcoming him with rose petals and hugs, Ameenah, almost disdainfully, said, "Nabil is sleeping. You can't wake him."

I had no strength to speak. Accepting Ameenah's words as law, I sat on the bench. Dawn was approaching. With some determination, I went to pull of my boots but I couldn't. After much effort, I managed to get them off. I took my pants off as well as my socks, leaving everything in a heap there. Finally, I took off my beret and placed it on the bench.

I was about to get up when I felt intensely cold all over. My body shivered and I thought a needle had pierced me in the head and out through my body. I felt naked. Somehow, I staggered to the door and knocked. Then I blacked out.

When I awoke, I found Nabil's face staring at me from my chest. When I looked at him, he ran off. Perhaps he had gone to tell his mother that I was alive. I tried to get up but failed. It looked like all the blankets, sheets, and comforters in the house had been piled up on me. I was under the stairs.

The blankets and pillows told me that Ameenah and Nabil slept here too. Why were they not sleeping in the bedroom? Before I knew it, Ameenah came and ordered me not to get up. I asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing. Lie still. I'm bringing you some tea."

Nabil was starting to talk. He kept stroking my face, ears, hair. Was he checking to see if his Abba was okay? Who knows what his childish mind had heard or understood? I drank the tea Ameenah brought but she wasn't speaking. Silently, she removed the covers and I asked, "Please tell me what happened. And why are you sleeping here?"

She said, "It's stopped now, but Indian planes fly by at any time, bombing the area. If you saw Nabil then, you'd know why we're here."

I asked, "Where are Dr. Ali Ahmed and Hasnu?"

Dr. Ali Ahmed was exactly where he was supposed to be. When he came home, we had lunch together. I spoke a little but didn't say anything about what I had been through. He didn't care to ask either. Then he went to get some rest. Hasnu and Ameenah chatted, and I sat alone. I lay down on the sofa and then got up again. Even though I had been warned not to, I called Akhtar Daad. He took my number and said, "Wait there. I will see you."

In the evening, I called Jahangir Nasrullah's home. His mother picked up the phone and I gave her my number after some persuasion. I asked, "Where is Jahangir Nasrullah?" She said, "Son, he's leaving Lahore by train today." I asked where he was going and she replied, "First, to Karachi, then on a ship to East Pakistan." I became restless at her words but I didn't ask her anything else.

Without saying anything to Ameenah, I put on my uniform and went to Lahore Station where I met Jahangir. The special train was leaving at night. I took him to one side and warned him, "Don't you dare go to East Pakistan." Surprised, he asked, "What am I supposed to do then?" I said, "Be ill when you reach Karachi. Then get admitted into the CMH." Innocently, he said, "But I'm not sick." I said, "You have a stomach ache. The food on the train made you sick."

I left shortly. At ten am on December 10, the driver appeared with the CO's jeep. There was another man too, with a weapon, but he wasn't armed. The driver handed me a piece of paper from which I extracted another paper. It was a transfer order. Backdated. On the other piece of paper was written, "Make sure you don't lose this transfer order. Keep it with you at all times. Don't go anywhere. Someone will come from where I've posted you." There was a carbon copy as well. I kept the order copy. When the driver left, I turned the paper over to see another message: "My driver is an Ahmadiyya. You can trust him blindly." I didn't understand what that meant, but a postscript asked me to tear up the message. So I did.

I placed the posting order in my wallet and re-entered the house.

It was becoming clear from the BBC broadcast as well as from the Indian Radio that Bangladesh would be independent any moment. We didn't have to wait for long. Manekshaw's ultimatum was given and so was Indira Gandhi's ceasefire ultimatum. We, of course, didn't know the details.

On December 16, when the phone rang, Dr. Ali Ahmed handed the receiver to me. From the other end, Jahangir's mother said, "Congratulations, son! Bangladesh is born!" I couldn't say a word. She continued, "The surrender is happening now." Then she congratulated me again. This time, I thanked her and hung up. Quickly, I turned on the television to hear whatever they had to say, and we made our own interpretations. A little later, we suddenly saw Lahore in turmoil. People were crowding the streets. This

was turned off quickly and only a tiny news item about the surrender of Pakistan, otherwise known as the Fall of Dhaka, was telecast. We sat there, overwhelmed with joy.

Man is a strange animal. The question for the past few months had been when will Bangladesh be independent, and now it was, "What will happen to us?"

Soon, Dr. Ali Ahmed voiced his thoughts. He said a lot of things – some of which I liked, some of which I didn't. It is only now that I think he had been right that day.

Akhtar Daad called. After congratulating me, he said, "Shahid, can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Can you come to our house now? Lahore is in chaos but you're on Mall Road, near the Cantonment. There's no trouble there. Do you have a car? Can you come?"

When I asked him why he needed me, he said, "My father needs you badly."

I couldn't say no to that. This time, I didn't wear my uniform. I drove out in my car. Akhtar Daad was waiting for me at their gate. As soon as I got down, he said, "We're in deep trouble, Shahid. Abbajaan and Zahed are fighting over your Bangladesh. Go inside. I'll wait here. See if you can do anything."

I knew every inch of this house and I could hear the yelling from outside. When I entered and greeted them, the noise diminished. Brigadier Saabdaad commanded me to sit, but Zahed wouldn't be quiet. He shouted, "You have done what that Hitler did. Your Bhutto, Yahya Khan have done the same to Bangladesh. You're rapists. Murderers. You've committed genocide!"

Zahed was saying whatever came to his lips. How old was he? Perhaps nineteen or twenty. His father was trying to control him but the boy said, "You can't stop me! Just admit what you did. You're an MLA from Bhutto's party. Couldn't you have said something? Didn't you know what was happening?"

When Zahed paused for breath, Saabdaad addressed me, "Shahid, please tell him that we were kept in the dark. Just as you were."

In a show of respect, I said, "Well, sir, not exactly. I wanted to know – that means I wasn't in the dark. And you didn't want to know. Or you knew and turned a blind eye. So you wouldn't know or didn't believe what you heard."

And that was it – I had just poured oil on troubled waters. Zahed's screams grew louder. Saabdaad Shaheb tried to stop him, saying, "Let's get some tea and snacks for Shahid."

"There will be no tea and snacks in this house! I'm not leaving. You will be punished in this house. Your Bhutto will also be punished!"

I got up and said, "Sir, I will leave now."

As he saw me off, Akhtar Daad said, "This day will end, Shahid. Please come again."

Without another word, I drove back. The next day, a havildar came with a company car to take my revolver away. In the evening, Akhtar Daad called again, so I went over. It was a different house today, all calm. I

was taken inside where Saabdaad Shaheb was sitting. He got up to hug and congratulate me. He told me how happy he was for me.

Snacks arrived. This house was well-known for its snacks. Aunty also came as well as Akhtar's younger brother, Shahed. We ate together and then everyone left. It was then Brigadier Saabdaad said, "Shahid, I understand that those of you who are in Pakistan are worried. I'm sure we'll find a way to take care of you. However, I have three options for you. One, you can return to Bangladesh. Two, you can stay here and I will make arrangements later to send you to America. You're an engineer, so there should be no trouble. Have your son brought over and one day, when the time is right, you can go to Bangladesh. And three, I have a lot of land in Lalamusa. You love nature and farming. You can take care of my lands. You'll be happy. Of course, you don't have to give me your decision right now, but come back tomorrow. Bring Ameenah and Nabil with you and have dinner with us. You can tell me then."

I got up and went outside. Akhtar Daad was there. He said, "You have a problem. And so do we."

I said, "How come I didn't see Zahed today? Where is he?"

He said, "It's sad but the other night we had to call in a doctor and psychiatrist to calm him down. Then we all decided to have him sent to an asylum. He's there right now, yelling and screaming. They're trying to keep him sedated. We've been visiting him and hoping he'll be fine before long."

A young man of nineteen had been sent to an asylum by his father, mother, and brothers – simply because he had spoken the truth about Bangladesh.

I visited Pakistan thirty years after this incident. Zahed was still ill.

I went to dinner the next night with Ameenah and Nabil. The atmosphere in the house was completely normal, as if nothing had happened. We ate and chatted for a while. I heard about some of the games the generals were playing in Pindi. Bhutto had stopped a coup in the army, but he would punish them severely. Hamid wanted to continue the fight but the Pindi officers protested. Yahya Khan was drunk.

There was nothing for me to say in this conversation, so I simply listened. Then we left. We were quite happy with the news we got from the BBC and Radio India. That Bangladesh had gained independence was a fact. But Bhutto had taken over here. On December 20, he took Yahya Khan to Jhelum.

When the women heard that Yahya Khan had been taken to a rest house there, they came to beat him with their brooms. The papers were now singing a different tune. Everything was Yahya Khan's fault now and Bhutto was innocent. Only Punjab Punch reported otherwise. I learned that those MPs – Mufti, Wali Khan, Bugti, and others – who had gone to East Pakistan to join Bangabandhu in forming the government had been sent to jail by Bhutto. Except Azgar Khan and Abdul Quayyum Khan.

Bhutto began to show his hand after December 20. All the Bangladeshi Bangali officers in the army were summoned on February 28. I went – reporting to the pulton near the cantonment. A general came to address us there, along with many other officers. He said, "Gul Hasan is now Chief of Army Staff. CNC has been dissolved. Bangladesh has emerged and those who want to leave can do so. You can leave very soon. Gul Hasan doesn't want anyone to be harassed."

Later, I learned that the Bangali officers in all the defense forces of Pakistan had been assembled on the same day in different places.

The general filled our ears with sweet words. Finally, he announced that we would have to sign an allegiance and those who wished to could stay. They wouldn't have to sign the allegiance. Then he let us go. I eagerly signed my allegiance to Bangladesh and returned home happily.

Ali Ahmed was not too happy that we continued to stay at their house. One morning, I heard Hasnu screaming. I ran down and Hasnu grabbed my arm. Ali was holding on to her other arm and the banister. Like a madwoman, she screamed, "You need to leave this house immediately!" I calmed her down and made some calls. I found out that the CO shuttled between Lahore and the front.

I went to him right away. The area was very familiar. The CO came out and ushered me in. As we snacked, I said, "Sir, I need a house." He asked, "When do you need it?" I replied that I could come in the next day or two. He assured me that a house would be ready, a huge house, C-type, for colonels.

Meantime, Major Lodi entered the room. He blew up as soon as he saw me. He said, "So! You're going to your new country?"

I replied, "Yes."

Immediately, he shouted, "You bloody bastard. You are officers of an enemy country now through your allegiance. So you're now POWs. You will face trial. You'll all go to camp now as war criminals."

I didn't say a word. Colonel Rashid Malik stopped him. He called someone and asked him to get a house ready for me right away, and then gave me the address. He also gave instructions to furnish the house from the unit. He laughed happily – as if he was happier than me at the independence of Bangladesh. He said that his younger brother had been at Chittagong for a while. He used to have a business there and could speak Bangla well. He had left everything behind when the war began and told the colonel many stories. He also described how the Biharis were. I returned home after some time.

I told Ameenah that I had got a house and that we'd be going there. Dr. Ali Ahmed had begun to dislike my words, the way I went to the bathroom, my smoking, eating too much meat, etc. Naturally, he wouldn't. He was a frugal man. Ameenah understood this as well, so she began to pack as soon as I told her. Hasnu was relieved. I think she had been under pressure from Ali Ahmed, who disliked waste. He would come to our house later with six *golapjams*.

Regardless, we left and moved to the cantonment. The house was new and large, with many rooms and a huge kitchen. I also got a batman called Rowshon. Nabil nicknamed him Orsi. Rowshon didn't look like he had ever had much sense, but he was a very obliging employee.

Days passed but I heard nothing regarding going to Bangladesh. I had told Brigadier Saabdaad so long ago that I wanted to go to Bangladesh and he had hugged me so affectionately. Where was that Bangladesh? When would we be able to go there?

One day, a Volkswagon car appeared, luggage tied up in its rooftop carrier. Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Mannan Siddiqui alighted from the car, along with Bhabi, Mitu, Rono, and the young Shweta. Shweta

was sick and had to be carried in. I grew anxious when I saw them. He said, “Calm down. We have come to stay for a few days. Do you have a problem?”

I said, “Of course not, Mannan Bhai!”

He said, “My daughter has a problem and I can get treatment only in Lahore. She needs chemotherapy. So we have to stay here for a few days.”

Quickly, I showed them to a room and unloaded their car. We offered them our bedroom, but he refused to take it. The next day, I accompanied him to the hospital where I found out that chemotherapy was a treatment for cancer.

Mitu, Rono, and Nabil played together, but it was very hard to see Shweta’s suffering. The usual smiles on Mannan Bhai and Bhabi’s faces had disappeared. After fifteen days of chemotherapy, they left.

Then came Major Muktadir with his wife and son. They hadn’t got accommodation, so they too stayed for a few days.

One day, my Moula Bhai appeared out of nowhere. Having Moula Bhai around meant good times. But there was no update on our going to Bangladesh. I heard rumors that going wouldn’t be that easy because all the heroes of the Pakistan Army had been taken to India. So, until everything was resolved, no one was going anywhere. Then I heard that we were “prisoners of war.” I couldn’t understand when that had happened. By this time, I had sold our car, TV, and everything else except for the two-in-one. Nadera apa’s brother came one day and took the money that I had received after my allegiance. He said that he would return it in Dhaka. I thought that since we were leaving anyway, why not let the money go first? So I had no savings now. But I received a salary of 1,100 rupees, so we were okay.

Nabil had a bad cough. The doctor even gave him some medicine, but the CO, on hearing of this, treated Nabil to two bowls of ice-cream at Lord’s. I was shocked! I said, “Sir, what are you doing? The boy has a cough.” He said, “What does a cough have to do with ice cream?”

Col. Rashid Malek and I spent many days like this on Mall Road. He was unmarried and one day, his mother asked me to meet a potential bride on his behalf. That didn’t work out though. Despite these distractions, my days were filled with anxiety and restlessness. Such uncertainties are rather bothersome.

Chapter Eighteen

Prisoners of War

We were informed that we wouldn't be allowed to remain in Lahore anymore. But we wouldn't be sent to Bangladesh either. In other words, all the Bangali officers would remain in Pakistan as prisoners of war. We would be demoted to our previous ranks and be given a subsistence allowance with no rations. So I became a captain from a major, with no batman. We were treated as prisoners of war now. We would be taken to Badiya in Murree. Our subsistence allowance would perhaps be enough for a family's survival – or not.

A war had taken place in one of the two parts of Pakistan where most of the officers and soldiers had fought again the Pakistan Army and its allies. In the other part, those Bangali officers and jawans who were posted in Pakistan and didn't go to war for some reason were now being kept as POWs by the Pakistan Army.

Now I realized that the general who had spoken such sweet words to us and made us sign the allegiance had actually lied. As soon as we signed the allegiance, we became part of the Bangladeshi Army and, therefore, enemies. We could now go to Bangladesh now only through a POW exchange. So we sold everything we had to get the money to Bangladesh through middle men, because eventually, we thought, we would all be going to Bangladesh. Besides, there were rumors that when we got on the plane, they would seize all our money and jewelry. So, this seemed the best option. The rumors were spread by Pakistan.

As soon as Pakistan lost the war, all the Pakistani officers and soldiers in Bangladesh became POWs and vice versa, according to the Geneva Convention. Towards the end of '73, when prisoners were exchanged, we landed at the Dhaka Airport to hear that we were "repatriates" – not POWs, not freedom fighters. This was a huge conspiracy meant to degrade and humiliate us.

Our life as prisoners of war began. Badiya is a mountainous region. We were taken there by train up to Pindi Station where rows of trucks awaited us. The trucks were loaded with our luggage, and then we boarded as well. We were treated the same way as I've seen in movies. We set off, crossing Murree, which itself was 7,000 feet high. We climbed higher. Finally, we arrived at Badiya, the POW camp. The truck drove upwards, and then slight down to come to a stop by a field. The trucks were quickly unloaded. Evening was descending. There was no one in sight. We had to pick up our own luggage and receive our assigned locations. Two havildars appeared with a list and a couple of other things. There was a barrack some way above the road. I had been given a section at one end of that barrack. I had some large boxes, all filled with books and diaries. It took two or three of us to lift them. Leaving the luggage on the verandah, I left Ameenah and Nabil there and went to take a look around. There were two rooms and a bathroom with a Thunderbox at the back. The Thunderbox was filled with faeces. How would I clean all this? And where would I dump them anyway? We had fallen from grace. It took me until ten pm to somewhat clean out the room with a fireplace. There was one bed which I made up. We had a meal of bread with water and went to bed. Each of us who had arrived today had to do what I did.

The next day, we found out that Shahadat, Major Rabbani, Mannan, Dr. Major Mustafa were here with us. There were several other barracks like ours. There were some houses too where the doctors had been

put up. The senior majors and lieutenants also got houses. Apparently, there was a local market down in the valley.

I went to the market and got some wild spinach. I remembered that I had eaten something like this in my childhood – we would pick the kalmi, helencha, kantanote, taro leaves and stems from different places and bring them for Ma to cook. Our rice, however, was freshly husked. Unhusked rice was bought from the market and boiled. This was sun-dried and taken to Montu Nana's house next door because he had a thresher. I would wait with Mojnu's Ma for the rice to be threshed and bring it home.

I bought some rice at the market here. There was no fish to be had and the meat was either mutton or sheep. I bought a local chicken and some tiny eggs. Cooking arrangements were made with a kerosene stove. Nabil was happy to see food cooking. I loved cooking, so I concentrated on that. Thus began our life of imprisonment at the barracks.

One morning we were told that there would be physical training. Major Muktadir would lead us because he had been given such a responsibility by our Pakistani lords. He would fulfill his duty wholeheartedly. Muktadir put his heart and soul into the activity and tried with all his might. But did anyone care? Except for the majors who became colonels, everyone attended. The training continued for three or four days, and stopped. The prisoner camp office was close by, overseen by a Commandant whom we never saw. He never came by either nor did anyone else. There was no one to see to us. We were allowed to visit Murree once a week, but to get there, we had to climb up the mountain and then down again to catch the local bus.

We played football or cricket sometimes, although walking was the main form of exercise. One day, the Pathan, Deedar, brought a cow. He told everyone to stand aside and then, all by himself, he twisted the tail, bent the neck and got the cow on the ground. He also slaughtered the animal. After removing the hide, he cut up the meat and distributed shares. Each share was four rupees. Overall, Deedar got three hundred rupees – quite evidently, he had made a profit.

Those who had become captains from majors and lieutenants from captains received 250 rupees for expenses. JOCs received 200 and soldiers got 150 rupees. No one could manage with these amounts. Some may have had savings, but the rest were empty-handed. Those in the lower ranks suffered most. Even after selling all they had, including jewelry, there was no respite. We weren't even provided with any rations.

Major Mustafa was our doctor. His wife was pregnant. Sometimes we visited them. The doctor liked to play cards and whenever he met me, his old passion would resurface. But he wanted to gamble and I had no money, so he would lend me the money to play. Unfortunately, I kept losing. He was quite happy with this, and, in the process, I got a couple of free cigarettes. On the very first day, I had demanded, "So, sir, where are our cigarettes?" He had laughed out loud at me, "Ours? That's great!"

He was an interesting character. One day, he took me behind his house and showed me a cow hung upside down. I was taken aback: "What's this?"

He said, "A whole cow."

"What for?"

"I'll eat only beef from now – nothing else. Don't you see how strong tigers become from eating beef?"

I was surprised. “So my whole life has been a lie!”

He said, “Yes, completely!”

I said, “Sir, if you eat so much beef, you’ll become a tiger.”

He said, “Well, no. Not a tiger, but I will be strong.”

“So your child will become a tiger’s cub!”

He replied, “I don’t think so. It will be human. But I will also feed it beef.”

I didn’t care how much beef he fed his son, but I was very happy when he cut out a large chunk of meat for me. We cooked that beef and ate with relish. Ameenah and I shared the kitchen work. It was my job to fetch water, wash the clothes and hang them out to dry. I also bottle-fed Nabil, but he wouldn’t let go of his mother, so I had to take care of most of the chores.

Sometimes Rabbani, Mannan, Shahadat and their wives, and a few others, would sit together and play word-making games. I viewed the mountains, the trees, the birds, the sky, the moon, stars, and sun, and the only thought in my head was that all these existed in my Bangladesh too. One day I would go there and see them all.

One evening, rumors spread that the Pathans had become agitated and were coming to kill us all at night. I have no idea who spread such rumors, but naturally, things became chaotic. Colonel Mamun and Colonel Mustafiz came to see what the matter was – they lived in separate houses higher up on the hill. After getting a handle on the situation, they helped to arm us with heavy sticks and told us to stay together and be careful. We set up guards for the night – our Commandant, however, was absent. The night passed uneventfully, but the danger was not over yet.

It was almost winter when a fiat came to a stop nearby. It was Colonel Rashid Malik. He had been my CO and he was here with his mother and sister. I ran down to the car and saw that he had come with a lot of things including medicines. I helped carry everything up. As soon as we reached the top, he let out his loud guffaw, followed by hugs all around, and we forgot all our pain. He picked up Nabil and bumped him up and down. Ameenah too was ecstatic on seeing them. I offered them tea and food, but they had brought some prepared food with them. “We’ll have this for lunch – no need to cook,” he said. “But tea would be great.”

Colonel Malik then asked me to accompany him on a walk. “I was posted here once you know. I used to work at the Light Engineering Company and stay at this bungalow. It used to be a lepers’ camp at the time. We used to stay up there. There were two or three bungalows, and the doctors and nurses lived there. The camp was gradually moved away as we objected. I heard that a dairy farm was set up later.”

I said, “That’s right. It was obvious when we got here.”

We walked for a while, then got on to a road, and then a bylane. There was nothing here except trees and mountains. We sat down in a quiet place and he said, “Shahid, there’s a case in the army against the two of us. I have been charged on two counts, you four. Your first charge is treason; the second is that you tried to escape at the border; the third: consorting with foreigners; and I’m not sure what the fourth is. The

worst is your attempt to escape. I don't know what the outcome of any of these will be, but do you still have that posting order?"

Quickly, I replied, "Yes. In my wallet." I took it out and showed him.

Calmly, he said, "Keep that with you now. And, listen. It's very difficult and time-consuming to prove treason, but there might be some records of interactions with foreigners. They're trying to imply that after December 16, you and I had some interaction."

I said, "Sir, before I got married, I had two foreign women in my room one night."

He said, "Oh! You sly dog! So, what happened?"

I replied, "Nothing, sir. Nasir was with me as well as two Punjabi officers. The two women were caught at the Wagah border with two military books that had my name on them. A summary of evidence was taken and it went on my record."

"Don't worry about that. Our crime is that even after you swore allegiance to Bangladesh, you and I continued to be in touch. They won't be able to hang us for that. I've heard that there's a list of 190 Bangalis. If there is a trial in Bangladesh or India, then they will do the same here. You're in that list too. They will arrest you, so be prepared for that. They will resort to torture as well, but speak only the truth. You have no idea what first degree torture is like. Death would be better. One more thing. There are things that you shouldn't even tell yourself. If such things get out, then it can be lethal. Forget everything we've talked about here. Swallow it up." Then he made an act of swallowing too. I followed suit. Then he laughed very hard, saying, "Now digest it!"

I said, "Sir, your coming here today is also an interaction."

He laughed at me again. "I'm not exactly in the army now. I'm just attached." He slapped me several times on the back now and pulled me up. "Come, young lad!"

We walked back and had lunch together. Then he took me outside again and, placing three hundred rupees in my hand, said, "Keep this."

I refused. "No, sir. I can't take it. I'll manage by myself as long as I can."

Without another word, he put the money back in his pocket.

In the days after Colonel Malik's departure, I waited anxiously – would I be summoned today? Accordingly, one day, the call came and I went. There was a Pakistani major, with a small office. Apparently, he was the camp commandant! Without much ado, he told me to sit. He said, "I have received an advance notice that states there is a case against you. You might have to leave for that, so be ready. Your family will be fine here."

He said he had no idea where I was supposed to go, or when, or who would take me, and why. I couldn't find out anything either. I hadn't told Ameenah anything before and I didn't say anything after I returned.

As winter approached, trees were cut down. I collected some pieces of wood that I found – I didn't like chopping down trees. I dried the wood and stored them in the next room. I lit the fire for a little while with a bit of kerosene in the evening. The CO had instructed me to burn every letter, paper, or diary I had. With

tears falling, I did so. It took me three days. The large boxes grew half empty – so many letters had accumulated over the years, so many papers, so much I had written in my diaries. Everything from my childhood went up in flames before my eyes. It was extremely hard to bear, but I had to do it.

It was my job to feed Nabil in the morning. He needed regular milk now. Ameenah and Nabil spent most of their time in bed with Nabil holding onto his mother. Nabil nicknamed me "Bulbul." If I did things for him, I was Bulbul; if not, I was Abbu.

Snow fell. On the first day, it fell until two in the afternoon – almost two feet high. Nabil's cough was still there, so he was always well covered. He stood on the verandah, excitedly watching the snow. He said to me, "Catch the falling snow in a glass. Mix some sugar in it and it will become ice cream. You can eat the ice cream."

He was not allowed to have anything cold, so he was using me to fulfill his wish. But after telling me what to do, he ran and jumped into the snow! His mother panicked. "Why didn't you stop him? Didn't you see him going in there?"

All I saw was a happy kid, laughing – innocent, pure, trusting. My heart grew light as I watched him. Paying no attention to Ameenah, we played in the snow for a while. Then I picked him up and carried him in.

Winter passed, but there was no call for me. We heard that we were to be transferred to Chakdoula in Jhelum. Accordingly, a car came for us one day. We loaded up and set off again down the mountain all the way to Islamabad. We boarded a special train at Pindi, with guards in the front and back. It didn't take long to reach Jhelum because the non-stop train was fast. There were army trucks in Jhelum for us. We were again taken to a prisoners of war camp, surrounded by barbed wire. We were taken through the fiery eyes of machine guns and lined up to be assigned our sleeping quarters. Rabbani, Mannan and I were allotted the same house. This time some soldiers helped to us unload our belongings from the trucks. I left my box outside on the verandah. Of the three bedrooms in the house, Rabbani got one, Mannan one, and I one. Rabbani made an enclosure on the verandah for his mother-in-law. There was only one kitchen, one bathroom, and one toilet for the three families. Even so, conditions had improved. At least, the bathroom had a flush and running water. The house was surrounded by a wall. I believe this house had been meant for a supervisor or someone of higher rank.

There as a parade the very next morning. I puled out my uniform and straightened it a little, then headed out. The long, white-haired Major Mehedi arrived. He was in the armor core. Retired. He was now the commandant of this area. In his speech, he said he wanted discipline. We were to wear our previous ranks from the next day. The canteen was open and we could get food there. There was a store for produce as well, but no meat or fish. He would try to ensure that these were supplied from now on. And he would try to give us as much comfort as possible.

We had nothing else to do after the morning parade, so we focused on our chores. I washed some clothes and made some milk for Nabil in the moring. I made breakfast and cut up some things to cook. I also went to the store, that is, the canteen store. I swept the house and made the bed. Ameenah helped, and Nabil tried to as well. He was getting older, starting to talk.

One day, a man appeared with two sacks of fish hanging from either side of the bicycle he was riding. He had just come to rest at the concrete pavement in front of the canteen and then I couldn't anything anymore. The man and his fish had fallen to the ground on being accosted by everyone. Somehow, he made it out of the crowd, but his fish was in a sorry state – if one had a head, it had lost its tail, and vice versa. What a sight that was! But even so, there was no dearth of customers. Seeing the state of the fish and the men, Major Akhtar said, "Forget the fish. Leave now. You'll see how many will be taken to the quarter guard soon!" The quarter guard was the army jail.

Mannan had managed to grab the head part of a fish, which made Rabbani laugh. Bhabi made a spicy curry with it, but it was impossible to tell whether it was *dal* with fish or *jhal*[53] with fish! We got a share of it though. I can't remember how long it had been since I'd tasted fish. Later, though, we were able to make arrangements for fish, except that we had to pay for the fishseller's bicycle as it had become a curry that day too. He came regularly and he even had a table on which he displayed his wares. But we had to line up for the fish, which was each one rupee. It was either *boal* or *ayer*, each one below a seer. At one time, beef also became available – two or three rupees per seer. It was difficult to manage with the money I had these days but there was no option. I would buy one or two eggs, which were given to Nabil, and a little to Ameenah. If I had one any time, Nabil would hide his under his rice and say, "You finished yours. This is mine."

A major from the medical division set up a card game which I began to join. After my morning chores, I would go there. Nabil would ride by with his tricycle, to everyone's delight, but he would say, "Abbu, Ammu is looking for you." It was a game he enjoyed. He would say this and laugh, and everyone laughed with him.

We began to go out these days, getting dressed up. I used to mostly visit Iftekhar. He had been brought to Pakistan during the war. He was a kid from Dhanmondi, married to Minu, and working in Jessore. His wife liked to cook, and he himself was an interesting character. He was preparing *kacchi biryani* for us one day, right in front of us. The lid had been sealed with some dough but Minu would intermittently place a tube on the side of the pot and listen. Apparently, this was the way to tell if the food was cooked! Finally, the *biryani* was done. I couldn't wait anymore, so I quickly grabbed some only to find that nothing was cooked! Minu, quite nonchalantly, said, "Just chew it up."

The Commandant summoned me one day. His office was close to the gate. He asked me to sit and then said, "I have some bad news, Shahid."

"Please tell me, sir."

"I think you're to be taken from here. Be prepared. Apparently, there is a case against you."

I said, "I know, sir. Just do me a favor and don't tell anyone about it. Only my wife and son will know on the day I'm taken."

[53] spice

The Commandant used to see Nabil wandering around, and he must have taken a liking to him. He treated him like a grandson. He would listen attentively when Nabil spoke even though he didn't understand. I would have to translate later.

Mannan Shaheb called me one day and said that I had guests. I came outside to see Brigadier Saabdaad's Volkswagon with Zahed and Rahila. They had brought food and other supplies. I ushered them in and laid out a mat on the floor for them to sit. We talked excitedly. Brigadier Saabdaad was now a minister. He had found our location from the GHQ and had sent them to check on us. I asked them to have lunch with us but they refused. Before leaving, Zahed handed me an envelope. I opened it to find five hundred rupees inside. His parents had sent it for us. I said, "Zahed, I'm really sorry but I can't take this. We have problems, but we're managing."

I was puzzled by Rahila and Zahid's behavior. Their relationship seemed to have changed. Later on, I learned that Faruk and Rahila had divorced and then Zahed married her. Apparently, that didn't last either. Rahila had left for the States with her children and mother. Many years later, I heard that her daughter was a doctor and had married in America. Her son, Omar, had married a girl from Mohammadpur and settled in America. How strange life was!

Captain Sayeed was a doctor and married to Ekramullah's sister. He had made some space for himself and was seeing patients here. Nabil wasn't doing too well, so, along with Ameenah, I took him to Dr. Sayeed. The space was a rather large hall and many patients were waiting in line. When the first person in line went in to see the doctor, everyone moved moved up one chair. That's how we got to the doctor. Sayeed had received some medicine from the Red Cross as well as a blood pressure machine and a stethoscope. That's all he had to treat his patients, although, if there was a need, patients could be transferred to the CMH in Jhelum, accompanied by guards.

I stood up when it became our turn and we were about to enter the doctor's office when Nabil made a run for it. He ran and I followed down that huge hallway. At one point, we were running side by side, and then I moved ahead and made a barricade with my arms. He ran into them and, oh! how he laughed! Who knows what had given him so much joy? I went back into the doctor's office with him and after checking, the doctor said, "We need to do an X-ray."

Nabil was taken to the CMH for his X-ray. Ameenah went with him but I wasn't allowed to go. The report came back the next day to Dr. Sayeed through the Commandant's office. The doctor said, "Nothing much. Still in the primary stage. I'm prescribing some medicines. He'll be fine. He needs to eat well – he's not getting the right foods."

Ameenah and I understood what he meant but where could we get good food? Prices had hiked as well. If I had one or two hundred rupees, I could feed Nabil properly. I have never borrowed money from anyone, and even so, who would lend me money in these tough times? I was walking towards the canteen alone, deep in thought. Usually Nabil was with me but now he refused to let go of his mother and stayed indoors, even though the doctor had advised us to expose him to fresh air and sunlight. I watched Mowla Bhai dancing around with his son in his arms. He lived in the house to the left of the road. I hadn't been down that way in a while but when he saw me, Mowla Bhai called out. Usually, he didn't behave like this though, but when he called, "Hey Shombhu Miah! Come over here!" I had to listen even though I was feeling upset.

After some chit-chat, Mowla Bhai said, “I heard from Sayeed that you haven’t been able to provide Nabil with proper food?”

What could I say to him? I couldn’t very well tell him that I had no money. Instead, I said, “No, not at all. I get three hundred rupees.”

Without another word, he went indoors and came out to tuck three hundred rupees into my palm. Mowla Bhai had been in Dhaka at the beginning of the war and then he had been taken to Saudi Arabia before he was sent back to Pakistan. He had some savings. I took the money without objecting. I could return it to him when I went to Bangladesh. Mowla Bhai said, “Feed Nabil some milk, eggs, bananas, biscuits, and such.”

For the time being, then, I had a solution. We could survive on this for several months, but there was no knowing how long we’d be here.

I began to notice a change in the behaviors of the POW inhabitants. Some had begun to pray, some seemed to be going mad. Dr. Colonel Hedayet’s wife was a very nice person, but one night, she opened her window and screamed, “Come and see how these snakes have come to strike at me!” She used say these things to her family members only at first but a few days later, she started going door to door at the POW camp, demonstrating with her hand how the snakes were striking at her with their raised hoods. Her condition worsened with each passing day – she would suddenly rush into someone’s house or room to hide under the bed, cowering. Sometimes, she would enter someone’s house, pull out everything from their cupboards and break things. Once a doctor major was changing his clothes. Alarmed by Mrs. Hedayet, he hid inside a cupboard, but she came in and tore open the door only to run out screaming through the camp, “Astagfirullah! Astagfirullah!”[54] She was also giving detailed descriptions of the state she had found the doctor major in. This went on for a few days.

Unfortunately, a small skirmish ensued as a result of this madness. A gentleman was sitting by the roadside, reading a Bangla novel. Seeing this, another officer went up to him and said, “Brother, please read aloud so we can also hear.” The man retorted, “Are novels ever read aloud? Are you mad?” And that was it! A heated argument began over who was the implied one here.

One day, I saw a ruckus at a house in the POW Camp. I went up close to discover that one man had climbed up a tree and the rest were staring at him. An enquiry of those waiting below produced the answer that the man who had climbed up was laying bird eggs. A couple of them advised not to do this though but the others egged him on, clapping. Witnessing this scene, a captain came forward and said, “I won’t hear what anyone has to say. I haven’t had eggs in days. I will have this egg today.”

During our life at camp, Ameenah began to badger me again. She said, “You never take the name of your Lord, and yet I heard that you used to go to the mosque to pray. But I’ve never seen you pray.

I replied, “I still do, but in my mind, silently.”

[54] “I seek forgiveness in Allah” – in this case, the implication is that she has seen something she wasn’t supposed to.

"Whether you pray in your mind or in public, one thing you *can* do is take our child to the mosque for Friday prayers. Then at least, he can pray and eat the shirni[55] after. And so could you."

Except for one or two times, I have never said no to Ameenah. I follow the golden rule – one should never say no to one's wife. And so, when Friday came along, I searched for my cap – but it was nowhere to be found! I found a pajama but couldn't find the panjabi. As we were planning to return home, nothing was in its place. I cut off the bottom section of my pajama and sewed myself a cap. Come Friday, I donned that cap, pulled on the pajamas and a half-sleeved Hawaiian shirt – because that's all I had: the shorts and button-down shirt from the prison camp. Nabil was ecstatic that we were going to the mosque to pray. Akhtar Bhai lived to the right of us, and the mosque was located to the left on the street after. The Commandant's office was next to the main gate and the canteen was down the street. Then we had to cross the store, walk straight towards the mosque to our left. Everyone – the officers, JCO, and soldiers – prayed at this mosque. Except for here at prayer, everyone did everything separately.

On the way to prayer, I spotted Akhtar Bhai in shorts and bare bodied, sitting on a rattan stool. He was playing cards by himself on a stool he had made himself. I wondered how I would pass by, but he looked engrossed in what he was doing. I moved forward silently, but couldn't escape. I heard him call, "Shahid, there is a limit to pretentiousness."

I stopped and asked, "Did you say anything, Akhtar Bhai?"

He questioned, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Just wandering around."

Akhtar Bhai said, "Great. Bring Nabil. Your Bhabi will cook him some semolina. He'll eat, and maybe we'll get a share with tea."

It looked like my trip to the mosque wasn't happening.

He asked me to sit, while Nabil ran into the house. He knew everyone here. Akhtar Bhai went inside to ask for the shooji halua[56] and tea.

He returned and said, "Listen, last Friday during the Jummah[57] prayers, our JCO from Noakhali, the Imam, recited the Surah Yaasin, but his pronunciation was wrong. After the prayer, there was a bit of a scuffle because of it. Now the little chance we had of returning to Bangladesh is gone because of that ass of a Noakhali's incorrect pronunciation! Punches were thrown so our Imam Shaheb was slightly injured, but they came to an understanding soon enough. But, as a result of this incident, a Sylheti JCO Imam was selected to read the Surah Yaasin and lead the prayer. Now you should be able to imagine what will happen at the mosque today. So, sit down and play cards with me."

I said, "I don't have any money."

He replied, "You don't need any."

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[55] Thick rice pudding traditionally offered to all participants at a Muslim prayer congregation
[56] A dessert made with semolina
[57] Weekly Muslim prayer on Fridays

The shooji halua appeared soon after we began playing – and so did the tea. Akhtar Bhai had settled in nicely. He had turned the verandah into a bedroom, added support to the ceiling, and shined the bathrooms.

We had hardly finished our tea when suddenly we heard a hue and cry. First, it was just in front of the mosque, but then it spread everywhere. I figured that it must be the case of the Surah Yaasin. Ten or fifteen men from the Commandant's office were running forward with the bayonets of their guns pointing.

Akhtar Bhai said, "Come inside quickly. Leave the tea." Inside, he said, "Just wait and see how many are arrested by the quarter guard."

An hour later, I returned home with Nabil to find Ameenah anxiously waiting at the door, having seen the state of affairs outside. Seeing us, she demanded, "Were you in the mosque when all this was happening?"

I replied, "No. We were outside."

"Thank goodness!"

A little later, she asked again, "Did you get to eat the rice pudding?"

"No. We had shooji halua today."

Ameenah was happy and I was saved. And Nabil kept his mouth shut. I didn't have to lie!

Workers from the Red Cross came and told us that we would soon be returning home. Planes were ready. I requested that we should be released from here and we would make our own arrangements to Bangladesh. Apparently, that wouldn't be possible. A major and a lieutenant got into a fight and spent the night at the quarter guard's. After all, they were POWs. We would have to accept whatever arrangments were made for us. And so, we waited for the Red Cross.

But time passed and there was no sign of progress. In the meantime, the monsoon began. The sky was cloudy all the time. It rained all day and night, and we were informed that the dam may burst. If that happened, there would be over 20 feet of water here. Or – the dam could be opened to prevent this flooding. In that case too, there would be 20 feet of water. There was no way we could stay here. The water began to rise as if the rain was falling not only outside but inside our homes as well. We had some polythene in our bag, so we put all our belongings on the bed and covered them up. Ameenah, Nabil and I sat close to the door and covered ourselves with a tarpaulin sheet. Just at that moment, there was a knock on the door. It was Akhtar Bhai. "You won't do anything, and if I do it, you all laugh!" he said. Swooping Nabil into his arms, he told Ameenah to come with him. To me, he handed an umbrella.

I pulled a couple of clothes from the pile on the bed and as soon as I came out, he said, "You don't have to lock the door. No one's coming to steal anything." Still, I bolted the door and followed him to find knee-deep water ahead of us. He said, "If they have to open the dam, they'll move us, but they're not opening the dam tonight."

He took us to his house and gave us dinner and a bed. He and his wife slept in the verandah room while the children stayed upstairs. Two days passed in this manner. The rain eased off and with it, the water. I went home alone to check how things were and a sorry sight met my eyes. It wasn't possible to stay here without fixing it, but there was no guarantee that we would get any help from the Pakistanis.

I found a ladder, then gathering up some mud, I patched the holes in the walls myself. Then I cleaned the room and put things back in their place. It took me until afternoon to finish. I had gone for a meal to Akhtar Bhai's sometime in the middle. In the evening, I returned to bring my family back. Thanks to Akhtar Bhai, we were saved this time.

Summer was ending and the weather was comfortable now. I would cut my hair once every two months. Nabil's hair had grown too. I told the barber to cut his hair short to which the barber agreed. From behind the wall, though, I heard Nabil telling the barber in broken Urdu, "You won't cut my hair short!"

One day, Nabil got hold of Major Yunus's (Signal) daughter and brought her home to play. He went into our bedroom and bolted the door. Everyone found this hilarious. After much persuasion, he finally unbolted the door.

Nabil had a cookie container of his own. At the beginning of each month, I would go to the canteen accompanied by Nabil. He had bought that container himself on one of these trips. He would always keep it hidden and take a cookie out when it suited him to eat. Somehow, human beings learn survival skills from when they are little. One day, I asked him for a cookie and after a lot of begging, he finally told me to stand with my back to him so I wouldn't see where he had hidden the container. Even so, as he took out a cookie, he kept saying, "Don't look! Don't look!" Only after he had taken out the cookie and put the tin away did he say, "Okay, you can look now."

He gave me one cookie and took two for himself. We both ate with relish. He, however, kept reminding me that it was he who had given me the cookie.

"You're going to become Haji Muhammad Mohsin when you grow up, aren't you?" I retorted back.

Of course, he didn't get my joke. Instead, he laughed, thinking I had praised him. In the afternoon, when Nabil was not in the room, I looked for the tin, but could find it nowhere.

Whenever a tractor passed by our house, Nabil would clutch his chest and shake. "Pressure machine! Pressure! Pressure," he kept saying. No matter how much I tried to explain that it was a tractor, he wouldn't listen. Later on, I found out that when he had been living with his mother at Hasnu's house, the Indian planes would fly overhead, bombing the area with their horrific noise. Nabil would be terrified. So now, whenever he heard such loud noises, he would try to convey that to us by clutching his chest and groaning.

In the morning, when Major Mehdi came to the parade with 16 soldiers holding their rifles up high, we truly felt like prisoners of war. When we saw the machine guns aimed at us should we wander towards the barbed wire fence, we felt like prisoners of war. When our homes were randomly searched to check if we had dug an escape tunnel, we felt like prisoners of war. They seized our TVs and radios because the media did not say anywhere that we were prisoners of war.

Ifti was worried. He had been in Jessore when the war began. His wife was Urdu-speaking and she had been brought to this camp too. They would go home from this camp as well. Colonel Mustafiz also looked anxious. He would often sit on the front steps of his house, holding his head in his hands.

One thing summed it all up – there was no news of our return to Bangladesh. In the meantime, we had heard on the radio that Ameenah's paternal uncle, Dr. Ataul Haque, had died from cancer. I was sad. The gentleman was a doctor, and he wasn't even that old. He had just one son, a very young boy still. Ameenah

was upset. On top of that, whenever she was alone, she cried for Anis. When I couldn't take it anymore, I would leave the house and think that maybe we would never see Anis again. We had no contact with the other side.

Akhtar Bhai had a radio that he could wire together and hear some news. So I would visit him sometimes for updates. Even he had no nothing to share. All of a sudden, one day, we heard that Brigadier Monsur was coming to visit our camp. We were to be all present in the morning. He wanted to address us.

We assembled in the two basketball courts that stood side by side. There was a table and chair set up at one end. Those who accompanied the Brigadier would sit there. On this day, all the officers, JCOs, and soldiers sat together. Brigadier Monsur arrived. He was a small, fair-skinned man. We kept sitting after he came in, but in a loud voice, he commanded, "Stand up!" What could we do but obey? We were prisoners, and that too, of war. We stood up. And then Brigadier Monsur asked us to sit as he too sat down. His companions also took their seats. For some time, he poured out beautiful words, then finally he said, "You're going home. We've made a deal with the Ariana Afghan Airways and the Red Cross will help you begin to fly back in a few days."

Then, in his own way, he spoke of Bangladesh, "Whatever's happened is past. Forget the horrible parts and remember the good. You shouldn't focus on the negative aspects." Perhaps it was a slip of tongue, but suddenly he said, "Sheikh Mujib is a great leader but he won't be able to run the country. East – Pakistan will be destroyed."

When everyone, except for two or four people, stood up in protest at his words, the guns were cocked and aimed at us. Brigaider Monsur was the one who stood up and told them to lower their weapons. Then he again asked us all to sit. "You'll never learn to be disciplined."

He strode off right after. Mehdi ran after him and so did the armed guards. I was sitting next to Major Akhter. He said, "Now you've heard and seen everything." I said, "I've neither heard nor seen anything. The Brigadier told us we're leaving and that's all I heard."

Akhtar Bhai retorted, "Go then! You'll see, Shahid, you'll see. So many hopes will be dashed – we're dreaming impossible dreams now."

Things happened very fast. The next day, when Major Mehdi came, Nabil said to him in broken Urdu, "Give us back our radio." Major Mehdi laughed and asked, "What did he say?" I repeated, "Give us back our radio." The old Mehdi responded, "Oh really? There would have been no one happier than me if I didn't have to take that radio away. They're making me do these horrible things in my old age. That Bhutto is a dopehead. Allah will punish him. But Shahid, I will try to get your name to the top of the list. Even if it's not on the first day, I will definitely send you home on the second or third day."

To Nabil, he said, "Child, now you're saved." He gave a soft chuckle and left.

The list came in the next day. Our flight was not on the first day, but it had been scheduled for the second day.

Chapter Nineteen

On Bangladeshi Soil

We were to fly on an Afghan airlines rented by the Red Cross. The first flight would be flying with Colonel Mamun and Colonel Mustafiz from the Engineering and Artillery Core. I gave them my in-laws' address and requested them to call and let them know that we would be arriving on the next flight.

Before we could fly, we, along with all our belongings, were brought by truck from the Chakdaulat Camp in Jhelum to a school in Lahore. We were treated to a good breakfast and lunch the next day. And there was literally a feast for dinner. It seemed as if fate had suddenly smiled down at us. Our flight was scheduled for ten o'clock the next morning. We were taken to the airport with our smaller pieces of the luggage the next day with Captain Khaleq directing the operations. He would see us off, and then take a ship to Chittagong with our larger pieces of luggage. A canopy had been erected at the airport with a gateway, and there was a spread of tea and snacks, cakes and pastries, and fruit. There were even flowers.

I felt like flicking everyone off. What a farce! As we sat waiting, Rahila suddenly appeared on the scene. She had come with some food and gifts. As we were talking, Rahila said, "Shahid Bhai, remember your CO Colonel Rashid Malik?" Somehow I controlled myself and nodded. Rahila continued, "He has been courtmartialled. There was a Bangali with him too but he wasn't punished. Rashid Malik has been dismissed. He had a narrow escape. I had heard that if anything happened to the Pakistani officers in Bangladesh, then those who were on the list here would have hung. You don't know what Bhutto is capable of."

I didn't feel like listening to this kind of talk at the moment of departure, but I couldn't say anything. I was saved by the call to board. After bidding farewell to Rahila, we boarded the plane. As the plane took off, I looked down towards the ground, waiting anxiously for the moment we would leave Pakistan behind. The Indian border was nearby. About ten minutes later, I guessed that we were in Indian airspace. Suddenly, my entire body felt lighter and I became ecstatic. My mind grew lively and I started saying all kinds of things to Ameenah. At one point, I said, "Even if I don't get paid, I will work" to which Ameenah commented, "Well, no. We'll need at least a bit of salary." Instantly, I responded, "Of course we'll need some salary. We have kids!"

The two and a half hours seemed to fly by like two and a half minutes. And then again, it felt like two thousand hours. When would the plane land in Bangladesh? When would I be able to step on her soil? When would I be privileged with the fragrance from her earth? My beloved land's soil, my Bangladesh's soil!

The plane crossed the runway and turned sharply to the left and came to a halt, quite some distance from the lounge. Some trucks were waiting there, along with some soldiers dressed in black and a couple of officers. But there was no exchange of salutes with us. One of them, in an authoritative tone, directed us to climb into the trucks quickly. Packing boxes were used as stairs and it was quite difficult for the women to handle. Still, everyone had a smile on their face – we were home! Our own country! But, at the back of the mind, I wondered why they had not been able to arrange three buses for us. This was equal to an insult.

The truck came to a stop at a hanger. There were more officers here, dressed in black. I'm sure these officers were trained in Pakistan, but now they neither greeted nor saluted us. Their behavior was rude

and rough. They told us to all stand in line. I was taken aback. Where was Bangabandhu? Wouldn't he welcome us home? If not him, then at least the prime minister. Failing that, at least the Chief of Army Staff could have been there. Not only did he not come, I saw, but there wasn't even a brigadier there. Where were the tables for us to sit, the tea and biscuits, and the garlands? After all, we were prisoners of war. We deserve a dignified reception from our own country. Instead, there was just insolence. This was unbearable. I was sure there was a huge conspiracy behind it and it would become clear to us some day.

When dawn began to break, I heard us referred to as repatriated officers. God knows who discovered this term but check the dictionary and see who are the repatriated and who the prisoners of war are. Check to see who is given in exchange for whom. It all seemed to be planned.

There was a major in a black uniform there. He looked familiar. I asked Shahed who said that he was a junior and an officer from the second war course. He was now in the Armed Core. He had been in Jordan or somewhere and had returned in November to join the war. Later, he joined the Bangladesh Army and demanded seniority. He was immediately granted one year seniority but was upset because he hadn't been given two years! His wife's sister's husband, Major Rashid (later Colonel) was in the Artillery Division. He too had come to East Pakistan and joined the war secretly. And now, here was this Major Faruk receiving us with insults. I was now suspicious about this Faruk and Rashid's part in the fight for freedom. Rashid and I had completed the JTC course together in Quetta. He was my junior, a lazy bum and a lover of Pakistan.

Suddenly, I spied my in-laws, Reza, and Ehsan waiting outside, their faces lit up with joy. Ameenah rushed to pull her younger son, Anis, into her arms, but Anis refused to budge from his Nani's arms. He held on to his Ammi (Nani) determinedly, while Ameenah was almost mad with desire to hold the child. Relatives of the others had also arrived and the airport seemed to have transformed into a place of reunion. The day was November 7, 1973. It was cold.

I didn't know that Rekha had got married and I was surprised when her husband Rahman came forward and introduced himself. He was also in the army. After some conversation, he said, "Noa Bhai, you have to sign some papers here before you can leave. Let Bhabi and the children go." How long would I have to remain standing? We hadn't even been offered a chair to sit.

Although our journey hadn't been long, it had been eventful. Besides, Ameenah had seen her parents and son after so long. So, naturally, no one wanted to linger at the airport. So I agreed with Rahman and said, "Sure. Let everyone leave and I will come later."

My father-in-law had borrowed a car to come here, and he loaded Ameenah and the kids into it. Others got into baby taxis and left.

I have no idea why my father-in-law had come to receive his daughter and son-in-law in a borrowed car. He himself owned a jeep and an Austin. What had happened to those?

After they left, I asked a captain, "What is this about signing?" He replied, "You'll see soon enough. You are still Pakistanis."

I was taken aback. I thought, "What is he talking about? We were still Pakistanis?"

I knew many of the officers on duty, but I pretended not as I went forward to ask, “Where do I have to sign?” Someone came towards me with a piece of paper, “Sir, here.” I asked, “What is it?” and he replied, “Allegiance.”

“Allegiance to what?”

“That you sympathize with Bangladesh.”

“I already signed an allegiance in Pakistan. I have already stated that my country is Bangladesh. I will not sign any of these papers if the seven crore people of East Pakistan did not have to sign to become Bangalis. Tell me if each person has signed an allegiance? The Jaamat, the Razakars, the Al-Badr, the Al-Shams, the Muslim League, members of the Peace Committee, the Freedom Fighters, and those who were in India or elsewhere in the world?”

I was about to leave after my speech when I felt a tug on my arm. It was Shahed Hasan Selim. He thrust his mouth over my shoulder from behind to my ear and said, “Shombhu Bhai, you can’t lose your temper. Everything’s changed. You don’t know these people – they’re Freedom Fighters. They own the land now. Be careful. They’re dangerous.”

I said, “What nonsense!”

Selim replied, “Have a cup of tea.”

I said, “I won’t have tea in this tiny cup, and that too, black and, I guess, cold. I’ve only seen sweepers drinking from cups like this.” With that, I strode off.

They saw a flash of my temper and no one dared to follow me. I exited the airport and walked towards the terminal. From there, I set off for Dhanmondi on foot. After quite some time, a jeep pulled up beside me and Shahed Hasan Selim said, “Shombhu Bhai, climb in. I will drop you off.”

After I got in the car, he said, “Khaled Musharrof has summoned all those men who have come back from Pakistan to meet him in the morning. He wants to meet you but it will actually be an interview. You may then be given a blanket and some money.”

I remained silent. Shahed Selim kept up a monologue. He too had been on the Lahore Front. When there was a ceasefire, he had escaped from Pakistan. He asked if we had been punished for their escape.

I said, “Forget about it. The only route for a prisoner is escape, and that’s what you did.”

In a hurt voice, Shahed Selim said, “They don’t think that!”

We soon reached Dhanmondi. Shahed Selim didn’t get out of the car. Before he left, I asked, “Where are you posted now?”

“Intelligence Unit.”

Chapter Twenty:

First Days in Bangladesh

After bidding farewell to Shahed Hasan Selim, I stepped into my in-laws' house only to stop short. The house was too quiet and there was barely any light. Just one or two bulbs were alight. This house, at one time, used to be filled with noise and bustle, people coming and going, everyone immersed in dramas and songs. It was from this house that I had gone to Pakistan in the first months of 1970. It was now the end of 1973 and what deterioration had come on this house in these few years. It was obvious that some terrible trouble had besieged this house.

As I slowly entered the drawing room, I heard Nabil screaming. Ameenah charged me – "What took you so long? Nabil now wants to go back to the camp!" As soon as he saw me, Nabil poured out his questions. "We reached here before dark, but now it's night. Why are we not going back to the camp?"

In the meantime, a beggarwoman came to the door and Nabil queried, "What does that aunty want? Why aren't you giving it to her?"

Nabil had never seen a beggar before. Instead of trying to explain, I took him into my arms and began to walk from one room to another. But he wouldn't stop. He had one demand and he kept repeating it – we must take him back to the camp. When I couldn't calm him down, I went out with him. I walked along until I got to the corner of Sat Masjid Road where there was a store. Nabil at once began shouting, "Look, the canteen! The canteen!"

So I took him to the store where, seeing chocolates, he asked for some. To the storekeeper, I said, "We have returned from Pakistan just today to that house over there. Please give me two chocolates and I will pay later." The storekeeper smiled at my words and said, "No, sir. You don't have to pay. Here you go." Then he asked if we had come to Enamul Huq's house, was I his son-in-law, was Nabil my son. After hearing my responses, he said, "Okay, sir. Please take the chocolates. You don't need to pay." He handed four chocolates to Nabil. His words made me feel elated. Here was my Bangladesh! What happened at the airport was not my Bangladesh. This was my Bangladesh.

I returned home with Nabil in my arms. He kept two of the chocolates for himself and gave the other two to Anis, which made the child happy. This was the beginning of their friendship. Affinity among children is very important. Nabil was introduced to Anis as his big brother. To Nabil, Anis was introduced as his little brother. Ameenah was introduced to Anis as Ma and I, his father. This went on for some time.

Mintu got news from somewhere and rushed to see us from Adamjee. He gave me all the news from Jessore.

Morning came. Everyone in this house seemed to have recovered some of their earlier happiness. Ameerah had visited America before the war and Taheerah had gone there during the war. Only Reza and Ehsan remained. Reza was a Freedom Fighter. He had gone to the airport in his bushy beard, red eyes, and a T-shirt worn over a lungi. I wanted to ask what had caused this change but couldn't. I thought of asking someone later and kept quiet for now.

The next day, I had breakfast and left for the cantonment. I presented myself at the designated spot, where there were many other officers. Some of them had arrived with us yesterday. Someone informed me that

Khaled Musharrof was inside. They were all going in one by one to meet him. I think the serial was rank-wise. A few officers were standing in a line nearby – each was handed two blankets and 300 taka. I was summoned, so I went inside. There was a long corridor with a dais at the end where Khaled Musharrof sat. He, of course, was now a Brigadier and the present CGS. I had come in civilian clothes. I stood, but instantly I made a mistake. I looked at Brigadier Khaled Musharrof, smiled a little and asked, "Sir, how are you?" He screamed, "Don't move a muscle!"

There was no hint in his behavior that he had ever seen me before. In English, he said, "So, you've enjoyed being in Pakistan?" My blood boiled immediately. I said, "Sir, you were fighting here and the Pakistanis were sitting us on their laps and treating us to halwa."

He said, "Shut up! Do you need any leave – although you've been on leave for a while now?"

This time I refused to speak. He continued, "Have you decided when you will join?"

"Sir, I will not join this army," was my response.

He seemed to explode on hearing my words. Then he began to speak in Bangla: "You enjoyed yourself in Pakistan and now you won't join the army here!" He began to insult me, saying whatever came to his lips. Finally, he said, "Get out of here! Bastard repatriate! Get out!"

I realized now how far Bhutto and the Pakistan Intelligence had influenced the atmosphere.

Instantly, without caring about an about turn, or an attention, or a stand at ease, I strode out. This man had come and stayed in my tent in Murree. I had even taken him to the Mess for a drink, not to mention so many other favors. Such nefarious activities and here he was feigning complete ignorance of me. Mowla Bhai saw me coming out, fuming. He figured out what he could expect inside. To me, he said, "So, Shombhu Miah, what's going on? Come here and take your blanket and money."

I said, "You take the money and sleep on the blanket."

Mowla Bhai laughed. Ignoring him, I marched to the main road, took a baby taxi, and went back home. Ameenah asked, "What did Khaled Musharrof say?"

I said, "Not much. But I thought about it for a while and decided to quit since I was supposed to work there for seven years, and that time has long passed. I didn't want to start anew here. So I told him I didn't want to continue."

Ameenah stuttered, "What do you mean! You don't have a single penny in your pocket!"

She rushed to see her father. "Abba, he said he's not going to work anymore. How are we supposed to live?"

Even later, Ameenah scolded me for my decision. Perhaps it was because she could. But I knew that the job was not right for me – they were Freedom Fighters, they had fought for liberation, it was a new country, and the army should be selected from among them. The new government should release the officers who had been in Pakistan. They should have made General Khwaja Wasiuddin the Chief of Army Staff, and instead of promoting or demoting anyone, each person whould have been transferred in the same rank to form the new army. I had no doubt about some of those who had not fought even while being in the

country and those who had come back from Paksitan to fight. If an army officer was placed on a battlefield, he would fight. Those who had done so had received the greatest gift, Bangladesh. It was only natural that such people would be recognized with titles, but they shouldn't get seniority rank or extra promotion due to being Freedom Fighters. The latter and prisoners of war must be judged equally. General Wasiuddin should have been appointed Army Chief just as MH Khan was mad the Naval Chief because he had been a POW. The more I thought about the job, the more I knew that I had made the right decision.

General Zia, General Shafiullah were in the 12 PM just as General Mannan and Brigadier Dewan were. The latter two were POWs but they remained Lieutenant Colonels while Zia and Shafiullah became Major Generals, which was a gross injustice.

Those Americans who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan did not become Generals over their counterparts who did not fight. That was the rule.

Two days later, we went to Jessore. My father-in-law had called ahead to let them know, but when we arrived at the airport, there was no one to receive us. We took a rickshaw home. The door was open, and Rekha and Hasan came running out to greet us. My eyes searched for Moin. When we four brothers left home for jobs, it was Moin who remained the life of this place. Even thinking that Moin would no longer be here hurt. I learned that Ma would become unconscious if Moin's name was mentioned. Later, when talking to Abba, I made the "m" sound, he raised his hand to silence me.

We stayed in Jessore. I took a thousand taka from the money I had saved with my father-in-law. For now, that was enough. Ameenah stayed close to Ma and gradually helped restore her spirit. Both Abba and Amma appeared to be slowly recovering. They were beginning to smile again.

Sometimes, Hasan and I talked. It was from him that I learned of the various problems the family had faced during the Liberation War, of how my students had saved them. If they hadn't helped, no one – Abba-Amma, Boro Bhai and his family, Mintu and his family, Rekha, or Hasan – would have survived. What Boro Bhai did for the Muktijoddhas also received a lot of attention.

Rekha's husband, Rahman, was also in Jessore. One day, he mentioned that the Brigade Commander here was Brigadier Manzoor who had asked me to meet him. If I agreed, he himself would send me a car. I said, "Not today. Perhaps I'll go tomorrow."

Manzoor had been BM in Sialkot. He had run away from there to join the Muktijuddho. He was an excellent officer and I wondered what it would be like to see him. I couldn't think positively after my encounter with Khaled Musharrof. Manzoor had visited me two or three times in Risalpur. We had eaten fish from the Kabul River and spent so much time together. He was a jolly man. I had met him at Pindi, in Mozammel's house. He had also gone to Risalpur with Mozammel.

The next day, a jeep actually arrived at our house. He had also invited Ameenah. Nabil refused to stay behind, so, accompanied by Rahman, Ameenah, and Nabil, I went to Manzoor Shaheb's bungalow in the Jessore Cantonment. When we arrived, Rana Bhabi opened the door and welcomed us in. We entered. Brigadier Manzoor rushed out and embraced us. He wouldn't let go. Then we talked for a while, until finally Ameenah said, "It looks like you'll need some more time. Let me go home with Nabil." Rahman too left.

After Ameenah left, Manzoor said, “Shaid, do you trust me?” I replied, “Yes.”

“You don’t want to work in the army anymore, right?”

“How did you know?!”

“Answer me.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

He said, “I’ve spoken to Khaled. Well, actually, he had called me. Listen Shahid, whatever happened in there was simply a misunderstanding. Nothing else. And you know that Khaled had taken a bullet to the head. He said that the sun had cast a light on you so that he couldn’t recognize you. And you too rudely said that you didn’t want to work there anymore.”

“Yes, I was a little rude.”

“We’ll talk about that later. Listen to me first. Give us two years’ time. Just two. Then we’ll release you from the army.”

I said, “No, sir. That’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

“Sir, it can’t be. I’ve thought about it for a while. Freedom Fighters and POW officers returning from Pakistan won’t be able to work together.”

“Why can’t they?”

“Well, sir, you all have taken two years of seniority. In effect, you have demoted us by two years – a permanent demotion. There is no bigger insult in the army. This has been done on purpose to divide the army. I was courtmartialled in Pakistan and I lost six-month’s seniority there as well, although I regained the time in the next rank. But here, it will be for life. It’s true that you fought in the Liberation War but in another sense, I too am a Freedom Fighter. In fact, almost all of us are – some in Calcutta, some in Canada, others in America or London. Why can’t I be a Freedom Fighter just because I was in Pakistan?”

He stopped me and said, “You’re losing your temper. Trust me, I’m not involved in any of this, and I know that those who had this done pressurized Bangabandhu for it.”

“That’s not the issue, sir. You and I can carry on in English addressing each other with ‘you,’ but the havildar who had a lower rank is now a JCO. What will happen to them? Those who had slapped or kicked that haviladar now ranks below him. On one hand, they have taken seniority, and on the other, promotion. The General of ’71 is now a Major General in ’73. Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, Brigadier, and then the Major General – how many promotions did you give? My seniority is most precious to me. Why would you insult that? Why would you humiliate me? A lot of things are accepted in the army, except insults.

There is a story in the Pakistani army. A soldier had returned late from leave. So his commanding officer, a Major, shaved his mustache and hair, put him backwards astride a donkey, poured a pot of buttermilk over his head, and made him ride around the company area. The soldier had felt so humiliated that he went into the quarter guard, loaded a rifle and shot the major. No one stopped him. Everyone stood in their own

place. Nothing happened to him even when he was judged. And you people are FFs. You have sat us backwards on a donkey, shaved us bald, and poured buttermilk on our heads. Do you think this will go by without reprisal? I believe that they should receive only medals or titles for their part in the war, and nothing else. We join the army to fight. It is our duty. The only difference is we're paid for it. That's all."

Manzoor stood up and fidgeted. I also stood up. He said, "No, you sit." Then he sat down too. I said, "Sir, return my seniority to me and I will work for two years for you free of charge. And no one will be able to match my hard work. The only thing I will ask for are three meals from the soldiers' mess for my wife and two sons. You don't have to pay me a penny."

He said, "My goodness! You're too sentimental!"

I said, "That may be so, sir, but sir, there is still time. Please do something. You understand, and you should make the other understand. If needed, meet Bangabandhu and tell him what a mistake this was."

He said, "Shahid, do you think that would be right? You don't know them all."

"I do know them. Sir, please do not insult the 28,000 POWs for about a hundred FFs and seven thousand soldiers. Don't humiliate them. You'll not be able to digest it. You should also know that the FFs are not happy that those returning from Pakistan are being given jobs. You've become embroiled in such a situation that both groups are dissatisfied with the government. I won't even mention Bangabandhu's name."

I continued, "Sir, I'm telling you one more time, please do something. Otherwise, you will have a lot of insulted, humiliated, and crushed officers who have returned from Pakistan. They will take it for a while, but then they will rise up. Who are those that came from Pakistan to fight? How did they come? Who sent them? Why were they sent, do you know? Instead of courtmartialling us, you demoted us by two years. And on top of that, you insult us. Fear is being created and we're being terrorized. Not everyone is Shahid. The big officers are fearful. These are all Pakistani plans – you'll be caught. India has taken the Pakistani Army who caused the genocide of ninety thousand people and are treating them to tea, biscuits, and cigarettes, but what will you do about the almost one and a half to two crore believers in Pakistan, the Razakars, the Al-Badr, Al-Shams, Muslim League, Jamaat and the Peace Committee, who have been left behind? If you don't curb them now, their next generations will grow to a few crores, and then both Bangalis and Pakistanis will be living on Bangladeshi soil. That can't happen. Judge these two crores now and send them to the concentration reform camp programs. Do something now or you'll pay for it later.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm a freedom fighter. I am not a repatriated officer. I'm a prisoner of war, so I am a freedom fighter. Why insult me? Somebody will pay for this!"

He responded, "Shahid, you've pointed out some valuable things but I'm not in a position to value your words or do something about it. Everything has changed."

I said, "That means things can change again. I will wait for that day. Those Bangali-Pakistanis will take over one day. They're known by various names now but who are they really? They're actually Pakistanis and that's what they will always be. So did we really become independent if a crore and a half of Pakistanis have their foot on our necks? We need some hard reforms. We should hang those who deserve it and

watch them closely. We need to put marks with tar on their doors to identify them. They should report to the police station once every month."

Manzoor laughed now and said, "Shahid, let's get to the point."

I stopped him and said, "Sir, listen to me. You don't realize the mistake you're making simply for the sake of the Muktijuddho. One, you've given seniority to the weak and ineligible, demoting us permanently for two years, a gross injustice. You've made the majors into major generals and promoted the others accordingly. And two, you've made Shafiullah the Chief by promoting him to Major General. On the other hand, you've labelled us as repatriates. You're insulting us constantly in this manner. In short, you've destroyed the army as an institution. The FFs are glowing in the limelight now, but slowly they will be destroyed."

Manzoor was a sensible man – not only could he talk, he could listen too. He was very patient. He laughed now and said, "Shahid, no one can match your tongue. Listen, everyone has changed. They've become blind. Listen to me – we need many officers now."

I said, "Sir, that's not right either. You don't want those officers who have returned from Pakistan. Still, you want to pick and choose, and maybe retain a couple. The rest would be dismissed. You couldn't do it because Bangabandhu wouldn't allow it. In short, the FFs are unhappy with the government and we who have returned from Pakistan are unhappy as well."

Manzoor burst into laughter again. "We've accepted cadets already and they need training. We wanted to send them to India but Bangabandhu doesn't want that. He wants them to be trained at home. You all have returned from Pakistan so, the training can be done here. He won't let them go to India. Shahid, think about this carefully and try to understand. Who's going to explain to Bangabandhu that we who fought the war are now Colonels or Brigadier Generals. Who's going to go to the Bangladesh Military Academy to teach those cadets? None of us were platoon commanders or instructors in the Pakistan Army. Apparently, we have many officers but they are all juniors. They've been here just three to five years. You used to be an instructor. My nephew is in England now. He's completing his course and will be returning soon. He's a good Major. And we're trying to hunt down a couple of others. The best we found is Mannaf. He used to be platoon commander. Apart from him, there was just one other person who's now a general – General Zia. We need to write our books. We need to write precis and prepare excises. We'll collect sample precis from foreign academies, then we have to read them, and customize them for Bangladesh. That's why we're asking you to give us two years. You'll be the platoon commander and we'll release you after two years. Do this for the sake of Bangabandhu's dream."

Bangabandhu was Bangabandhu. How could I say no?

It was late by the time we were done. Manzoor spoke of the many dreams centered on an independent Bangladesh Army. We had had dinner in the meantime. Rana Bhabi and the children had gone to bed long ago. It was almost the middle of the night when he said, "Go to Dhaka and meet Khaled. He really wants to see you. He also has some things to say."

I asked, "Where will the BMA be situated?"

"In Comilla. The work has begun already. Nazmul Huda is there. Do you know him?"

“Do you mean K.Q. Huda’s brother? He used to be a captain who lost his job because of Agartala.”

“That’s right. He also fought in the Muktijuddho. Now he’s a Colonel. 25th PMA batch. He’s Brigade Commander in Comilla. He’s going to be the ex-officio commandant of the BMA.”

Manzoor hugged me several times after our discussion and sent me home in his car.

Ameenah was very happy to hear that I had decided to remain in the army for another two years. The poor girl had been very anxious. I too felt that I had returned from a place of uncertainty. I went to sleep at dawn.

We returned to Dhaka and I went to the Army Headquarters early in the morning. There I learned that the Chief of General Staff (CGS) did not come to work before ten. So I looked for Mannaf and finally located him. I hadn’t seen him since our last meeting at Khadiya and he shook my hand warmly. He told me that when names were being selected, he had felt the need for me. It would still be some time before work on the BMA was completed because Bangabandhu still needed to sign some documents. So he advised me to report to the Engineering Directorate.

We had tea together and then I went to the CGS’s office. He still hadn’t arrived but I was told that he was on his way. I didn’t think it was appropriate to sit in his office, so I waited for him on the balcony. He arrived soon after and I saw him alight from his car like royalty. He took his cap off and threw it for someone to catch. Then he took his belt off and threw it to someone else. Then he twirled the stick in his hand a couple of times and stretched. Finally, he climbed up the stairs to the balcony. He turned, and seeing me, he said loudly, “So, Shahid! When did you return from Jessore? Come in!”

I went with him and sat when he did. I spoke first, “Sir, I am sorry.”

He said, “Not at all! Everything’s fine. I’ve spoken to Manzoor. It was just a misunderstanding. So what do you think of everything here?”

I said, “Everything seems to be pretty bad shape, sir.”

“Build it up!” he said. “Build it all up!”

Chapter Twenty-One:

First Workplace in Bangladesh: Rangpur

CGS Brigadier Khaled Musharrof asked me just a few questions about Pakistan. Then he repeated what Brigadier Manzoor had said.

"Go to the Engineering Directorate and meet Colonel Mamun. He'll set you up with everything. You will be called to the BMA when it's ready."

After a couple of minutes of similar talk, he asked, "What did the Pakistanis used to say?"

"What would they say? They called it high treason."

"They're right. If we hadn't committed treason, could we have got our country?"

"You're right, sir."

I went to the Engineering Directorate that same day. On entering his office, I realized that the Colonel Mamun here was not the same Mamun from the Pakistan camp. He had changed. There was no smile on his face nor any words. He spoke directly, "Your posting is in Rangpur as Garrison Engineer. Be there."

I said, "Sir, you know that I am having a little trouble with my young son. How can I go to Rangpur now?"

He said, "Such excuses are not acceptable in the army. Don't say another word. Go."

I didn't meet anyone and instead went straight home.

"I have to go to Rangpur. I've been posted there. Later, I may have to go to Comilla."

No one objected. And a couple of days later, I set off for Rangpur by train. There I went directly to the Brigade Headquarters to meet Brigade Commander Colonel Shafaat Jamil. I had met him just once before in '61 in Lahore with Ekramullah. He had been on his way to the Pakistan Military Academy. He was a coursemate of Kala Mahmud, Zahed Latif and classmate of Ekramullah. As I sat in his office, I watched as junior officers came and went. Later on, I learned that they were FFs. They didn't require any permission – they were flying high. One day their balloons would burst and they would fall to the ground in shame.

I had been waiting a while when I was told that I wouldn't be able to see the Brigade Commander today. I left my name and address, and someone took pity on me and pointed out the way to the Garrison Engineers' office. This was a deliberate insult.

At the GE office, I met a civilian garrison engineer called Bhuiyan. As soon I introduced myself, he said he knew about me.

He said, "Sir, I have set up your room for you. You can get some rest there today. You will be eating at the mess. We will begin the handing over-taking over tomorrow."

In the evening at the mess, Nur and Major Sufi got into a fight. Apparently, Major Sufi had laughed when he heard that Harun was now a Colonel. So Nur had taken him to task for it. This was the first time I heard the word "repatriated" used publicly because Nur had insulted Sufi with the word. He was saying what

those Pakistani freedom fighters had taught him. There were about 60 smart Pakistani freedom fighter officers and the rest were their toadies.

The handing over-taking over took place the next day. This was followed by the store taking the day after. I discovered a lot of anomalies there and I informed the garrison engineer Bhuiyan that I couldn't accept the stock.

The Brigade Commander had gone to Rajshahi and that evening, I was informed that I would have to go there too. When I got to the station in the evening, I found Bhuiyan Shaheb waiting there, pillow in hand. Apparently, the seats on the train were so uncomfortable that I would have to use a pillow to sit on. Fortunately, the train arrived on time and I found that I did actually have to use Bhuiyan's pillow. I was in the first class compartment but it still had quite a number of passengers. Bhuiyan said, "Sir, we're the only ones with tickets. The rest have simply boarded. The country's gained freedom, so everyone thinks they can do whatever they want."

We reached Rajshahi in the morning and went to the Circuit House in a civilian jeep. The Brigade Headquarters was a tent set up in the lawn of the Circuit House. The Brigade Commander used a map to explain the job.

"Your job s to find a place to construct a relatively small cantonment."

I asked, "Sir, what kind of cantonment will it be? I mean, how many units will it have?"

He replied, "There will be one Bengal Regiment there. There are a lot of miscreants in this area. So we'll station one battalion here to control them."

He drew a few circles on the map and said, "You can take a look at these places, but please don't select some farmland or garden on top of a hill by the road. Bangabandhu wants none of that. There were a few like that before but I don't want that repeated. We need at least 30 acres of land situated on high ground. Our Executive Officer, Zia Shaheb, will accompany you."

We returned to the Circuit House after this discussion. Zia came in the afternoon and we talked about the work. He was from Sylhet, a rather clever man.

Our expedition began. We looked around for two or three days and found only farmland. Then we found out about an abandoned house known as Rani Bhaban in Doyarampur. We located Doyarampur on the map but there was no way to get there. Finally, we took a jeep along the cartroad to the place previously known as Joyarampur, renamed Doyarampur by the Pakistanis after the Partition. The local people pointed out the way to Rani Bhaban. This building belonged to a relative of the Zamindar of Natore, but it was actually a shell of a building. We walked around the house and I drew a map of it on my hand. We also found out that the land on which this building stood was about 30 acres.

On the way back, we crossed a drying river and came upon a half-paved road. The next day, we reported our findings to the Brigade Commander, but he didn't seem very satisfied. Captain Kaiser told us that no one believed that we had actually crossed through a sugarcane field and gone there. There were Naxalites and Shorbohara members there and it was impossible that we had come away unharmed. We also heard that the Brigade Commader would go there the next day and we were to be ready.

When the Brigade Commander came to the Circuit House, his entourage included a few trucks of soldiers. Kaiser said, “Well, after all, he is the Brigade Commander. He needs to be in uniform.” We remained in civilian clothes. We were ordered to drive in front, followed by the Brigade Commander’s car and behind him, the others. Also, we were to take them along the same route we had followed the day before, in both directions. And so we did. We couldn’t recognize anyone once we got to our destination – everyone was covered in a layer of dust. We cleaned up with the water from a deep tubewell and had lunch. Happy with the area, the Brigade Commander said, “We can tell Bangabandhu about this place. There should be no problem.”

We learned that Bangabandhu was arriving the next day when we returned to Rajshahi. He would also visit Rani Bhaban. He would come and leave by helicopter, with Kamruzzaman Shaheb. When Bangabandhu arrived the following day, he was taken immediately into the tent, and then to the map room. The DC of Rajshahi, Rouf Shaheb – a stout man with long hair, was also present. I knew him from Pakistan. Bangabandhu pulled at his hair and enquired whether he had married again. I saw Kamruzzaman Shaheb for the first time. They emerged from the map room after a considerable period of time and I saw Bangabandhu speaking and shaking his head. All I heard was, “They won’t let us live.”

We all greeted him and he returned our greetings as he left. I asked the Brigade Commander, “Will Bangabandhu not visit Rani Bhaban?”

He said, “Are you insane? He came here without telling anyone – that’s a big deal. So I’m trying to send him back before dark.”

Shortly, G3 Kaiser handed me a piece of paper and told me that I had been summoned to Dhaka – I needed to go to Comilla. Bhuiyan Shaheb wold stay as the GE until Zahed Latif came to take over. When Zahed Latif called, the G3 handed me the phone. He asked to speak to Shafayet Jamil, and covering the receiver with my hand, I told Shafayet Jamil that Zahed wanted to speak to him. Shafayet replied that he did not speak to half Razakars. According to him, promoted repatriates were half Razakars.

I relayed this to Zahed who hung up. I thought, “If I know Zahed Latif, he won’t be coming here after this.”

We boarded the night train and arrived in Rangpur in the morning. Later that day, we set off for Dhaka. My update relieved everyone in Dhaka – at least Comilla was closer to Dhaka than Rangpur.

When I went to the Army Headquarters the next day, I met Mannaf. He was very busy at the time – the courses were beginning soon. He asked how soon I could go to Comilla. Garrison Engineer R. Huda Shaheb was there. He was a very good and responsible man. He assured me that I would have no problems there. I asked, “How about I leave tomorrow?”

Surprised, he said, “You just got back from Rangpur yesterday and you’re ready to go to Comilla tomorrow?”

I replied, “Not a problem, sir. Whom do I have to report to over there?”

He said, “You will report to Nazmul Huda Shaheb and also call the GE.”

I asked again, “Sir, has anyone gone there already?”

“No. On behalf of the BMA, you’ll be the first. But the others will join you within a few days.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Establishment of the Bangladesh Military Academy in Comilla

16 December 1973. I set off for Comilla by bus on this third year of Bangladesh's victory, arriving at Mainamati by night, crossing ferries several times along the way and driving along winding roads.

I found myself a place in the Brigade Mess and learned that Major Akhtar was here in the Artillery Division. So I went to his office the next morning. We had tea together and chatted for some time. He seemed happy to have me here. However, he called for a rickshaw when it was time for me to leave even though his jeep stood nearby.

I asked for directions and soon found my way to the BMA. It was located at the far end of Mainamati. We had to climb upwards and after some time, the rickshawallah couldn't pull anymore. He unloaded my belongings and left. A man was standing nearby and it turned out that he was the AGE here, Haider Shaheb. There were no garrison engineers here. I introduced myself. Apparently, he knew of my arrival but thought I'd be coming the day after. He was waiting here for some other purpose. When I asked to be taken to the office, he replied there was no such thing here. He called someone to help carry my luggage. I was led to a table set up beneath a mango tree. There was an armless chair and a bench too. I was privliged with the chair and he took the bench. I was told that the barrack had been looted and new furniture had not arrived yet. The rest of the things would come from Dhaka while others would have to be constructed here.

Haider Shaheb then proceeded to take me to the Commandant's office. The office was like a barrack and situated on top of a mound. From there, we went to another barrack which housed the dining room, the drawing, also known as the ward room. Climbing down and goind around a slight bend, we came to the few classrooms and a model room. The platoon commander's office was on the other side of the road at another barrack where the cadets would stay. On the path going down from there near the gate were the locations for the laundromatte, the barber, the store and the quarter master. As it was almost afternoon, I said, "I would like to meet Brigade Commander Huda Shaheb."

The AGE replied, "Why don't you meet him tomorrow, sir? He has a few officers here who are close to him including BM Major Anwar Shaheb. I will ask him to inform the Brigade Commander that you want to meet him. If you want, I can send the car for you tomorrow. It wouldn't be proper for you to appear at the Brigade Headquarter without a car. Come sir, let me show you to your house."

We loaded the jeep with my luggage and proceeded to my bungalow.

The house was located on top of a tiny hill. Standing on the verandah was my batman from Lahore – Hakim.

"What are you doing here?" I exclaimed.

"Sir, I'm your batman. I was given this post by the Engineering Company."

"Given or you asked for it?"

"Sir, I asked for it."

“So, why are you standing by the door then?”

“The door doesn’t have a handle. So I just pulled it close and stood here.”

Inside, I found the same to be true for the window – there was no handle. The drawing room and dining room was joint, there was a kitchen and three bedrooms. The bathroom even had a commode. There was the servants’ quarter and the batman’s quarter downstairs. There was also a tiny lawn. After my inspection, I commented to the AGE: “It’s not too bad. Just have handles fixed to the door and window.”

The next day, Haider Shaheb came in his old jeep to pick me up. We soon arrived at the Brigade Headquarter. Major Anwar came forward to shake hands as we entered his office.

“Have a seat. So, you’re the first one here at the BMA.”

I said, “Why’s that? There’s Sir – the ex-officio commandant.”

“That’s true. Come, let me introduce you to Sir.”

Before we entered the commander’s office, Major Anwar asked if I had met him before. I replied, “Yes, but he may not remember.”

As soon as we entered, Nazmul Huda Shaheb called out casually, “Come in, Shahid!”

God knows what he had remembered. I sat when he asked. He was a gentleman. He asked when I had arrived, what I was doing and where I was staying. He also informed me that Colonel Mannaf would be coming the following day. The rest would follow in a day or two. He asked if I had any complaints. Tea appeared and we drank together. I noticed the closeness between him and Anwar. Both had been freedom fighters.

He spoke, “Do you remember we met twice at the Khulna Crescent Jute Mill?”

I was actually a little surprised at his words. Before I left, he said, “It’s a new country, a new army. We have to start from scratch. There’s much to be done.”

I understood that whatever he had to say about the BMA would be conveyed to Mannaf.

Haider was waiting for me outside the Brigade Commander’s office. He said, “Sir, I have a lot of work to do. I have to take my leave after dropping you off.”

I said, “Can you please show me the chairs, tables, boards, shelves, clotheshorses, wardrobes that are here for the cadets?”

“Sir, everything has been ordered. Nothing is happening here. Contractors in Dhaka are working on them and they should arrive within a couple of days. Unfortunately, it will take longer for the cadets’ dining table and chairs to arrive. We’ve ordered the classroom furniture, the cadets’ chest of drawers, some tables and some chairs which should be delivered soon.”

Haider Shaheb left after dropping me off. As I had some time on my hands, I walked around and scoped out the area. Some of the contractor’s men were working here too – some clearing the field, some making a slope up to the mess situated on higher ground. But the latter work looked sloppy. It seemed as though these men had no expertise in this area.

I returned to my house to find that handles had been installed on the door and windows. Hakim had cooked, so I had my meal, and then in the afternoon, I went out again. I walked up to the BARD (Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development) and learned that a Pathan gentleman named Dr. Hamid Khan had contributed much to this place. He had brought pesticides, chemical fertizilers, and farmed the land. He had also planted some trees. In addition, he had set up the Comilla Cooperative. He wasn't here anymore though, as he had gone to Pakistan in '71. Apparently, he used to be an ICS officer but he had left his job to concentrate on his work here.

I went to the BMA the next day. No one had arrived yet. I climbed upstairs and sat on the armless wooden chair again. Soon, a jeep drove up and Mannaf Shaheb emerged. I quickly went downstairs and asked, "Sir, when did you arrive?"

He said, "Today. Just a short while ago."

"How did you get here so early in the morning?"

"By plane."

I was surprised to hear that there were planes here too!

"Yes, we have flights here. It takes just twelve minutes and costs twenty taka."

I took him upstairs and offered him the chair with the broken arms. He asked, "Are there no other chairs here to sit on?"

"No, sir. But I heard that all the furniture will be arriving soon."

He took off his cap, so I took off mine as well. Then there was silence.

A few minutes later, I watched as he pulled some hair from behind his head with his left hand to cover the bald spot on his head. Much later, I learned that this was a sign that he was angry.

He asked, "Shahid, have you seen everything?"

"I've seen all that is there to see."

"What else is there besides that tin fence over there?"

"Nothing else. But the AGE, Haider Shaheb, told me that everything will arrive soon."

"Have you met Nazmul Huda?"

"I did – yesterday."

"What did he say?"

"Not much, except that you would be giving the instructions. You're the Chief Instructor here and he's the ex-officio commandant."

Suddenly, he replaced the cap on his head, so I did too. He said, "Come, let's take a walk around."

He observed everything keenly. He would stop suddenly somewhere, appearing to think. I took him up to the mess through an inner path, a walking path. After his inspection, he came upstairs to sit. So I sat with him.

AGE Haider must have got wind of our arrival and appeared upstairs to greet us. Colonel Mannaf asked him to about the facilities here, what would be arriving, and when they'd be arriving. It seemed as though Haider Shaheb had come prepared. He opened his diary and listed off everything. However, Colonel Mannaf seemed to already know the details. He offered some suggestions at the end and asked the AGE to speed things up. He asked me where I was staying and whether Ameenah and the children had come with me.

I told him that I would bring them once I settled in. Then he dismissed the AGE and turned to me, "How's the house?"

"There were no handles on the door and windows, but they fixed that yesterday."

For the first time, he laughed. "Shahid, I've heard and I know that you don't have a problem with anything. You used to be at the PMA, in Risalpur where there were many facilities. That was an international quality military academy and here the government is just trying to set up a military academy of a poor country that is newly independent. There's nothing here, but we have to start somewhere. You've seen the situation – what's your opinion?"

"Sir, it's a new country, a new academy. If I get some hardworking officers, we can make something of it. We will reap what we sow. If we can start well, the development will continue for ages. To ensure that this academy runs for hundreds of years, we must sow the seeds of hundred of years now."

My words elicited a grave "Hmm" from him. Then he said, "Listen, Shahid, I think the cadets who come here will soon run away."

"What do you mean, sir? Why?"

"The Bangladesh Military Academy has not yet been born. So, at first, we have to show the first cadets as soldiers. The cadets will use the same blankets and eat the same food as the soldiers until the Military Academy is recognized. But whether the Academy receives recognition or not, we are going to begin work here with complete sincerity. The cadets may arrive a little early, so we will open the Academy from January 9. Can you do it?"

"Sir, with your support, I certainly can. But I didn't quite understand what you meant by the cadets running away."

He gave a small laugh and said, "Just checking your reaction."

I said, "If we keep the cadets busy, tire them out by the end of the day, but at the same time, if we have fun with them, no cadet will leave. Some might think about escaping, but that used to happen at the PMA too. We have to prevent that."

He asked, "How would you do that?"

“Sir, I’ve heard that the demo company will be coming from the Bengal Regiment. They can patrol the surrounding area. We have to place guards on the roads, although the cadets won’t run away through the roads. They’ll try to run through the hills.”

“You know, everything depends on the platoon commander.”

“How many platoons will there be?”

“Three.”

“What about another commander?”

“That will be Major Mahbub, a freedom fighter and Brigadier Manzoor’s nephew. For now, someone named Shahriar will be here. He is a freedom fighter from Baloch. The Company Commander will be coming too. Don’t worry. The furniture will be arriving from tomorrow too. Shahid, I don’t know everyone’s background, but I have heard a lot about you. You will be the number one platoon commander of our new BMA and you have to support me as well. You will have to help with a lot of my work. You know, an institution can be developed if there are a few good men who are sincere in their work. Not everyone can do it. They’ve never worked well before, and they won’t do it in the future. So, be prepared.”

Everything seemed happen at once. Some of the officers who came were married, others were not; some came with families, others did not. In the midst of this, a company commander arrived – I won’t mention his name, but he became a general afterwards. The first thing he did was demand to know of Mannaf about where his house and his furniture was. Colonel Mannaf sent him off almost immediately. According to him, he was a “chocolate cream soldier.”

That was enough to tell me how much authority Colonel Mannaf had been invested with. Then Major Amjad Ahmed Chowdhury arrived as Company Commander. He was tall and very handsome – and, as Colonel Mannaf informed me, an excellent officer. He was from the Baloch Regiment.

One day, Major Shahriar appeared at my doorstep with his belongings. He had come here as platoon commander for a short period. I gave him a room, but then two others arrived, needing a place to stay. I had only two extra rooms but we placed beds in each to make room for four. I had my own room and Hakim cooked for us. On Sunday, Shahriar himself cooked. The only problem with Shahriar was that every now and then, he felt the urge to sing. Sometimes, it would go on till one or two in the morning and I didn’t quite like his songs. However, most of the time, we would gather in his room for an adda.

Colonel Mannaf tasked me with establishing the Officers’ Mess. I bought almost everything directly and, in the meantime, the rest of our furniture arrived. It was decided that the curtains would be made from the Comilla *khadi* cloth. Curtains would be needed for the offices, mess, cadets’ mess, drawing and dining rooms, and Mannaf’s commandant office. After visiting one store, though, I was told that one store could not supply so much material. So I asked them to get more people to make the cloth. In this way, I had to make arrangements for various other supplies. Suddenly, all the furniture arrived at once. Different people and the demo company were put to work. The only items missing were the dining table and chairs. Blankets were spread out all around – the cadets would sit on these and eat for now. Some furniture arrived for the anteroom. The rest of the cadets would remain standing. Chest of drawers – a necessary item –

arrived for the cadets, and so did their blankets, sheets, pillows, and curtains. Cars arrived and cadets were picked up from the rail and bus stations.

In the meantime, Colonel Mannaf and I decided that we needed to recruit some officers to train the cadets. They would make the cadets crawl on dry ground and through drains, and frog jump. They would need to ensure that the clothes the cadets wore to the training were thoroughly dirtied. They should make the cadets climb up and down the hills. Drill Master Mujib seemed to be our best choice for this job. Subedar Akhand, a Method Officer, had arrived and had started work. Major Mujib of the Education Core also arrived. He was a very handsome man and would be teaching English. He settled in in the house next door. His wife, Gogi, arrived with their two sons, Adil and Kasef. Kasef was the younger of the two and extremely naughty. The Bangla teacher, freedom fighter Lieutenant Shafiq, was a dark and somber man, but he appreciated humor and was capable of it himself. But he didn't laugh. Then there was Badar, a very methodical officer. He would go to the extent of even unfolding his napkin, shaking it out, and then placing it on his lap. Kala Mahmud was our weapon training officer. There was Altaf Shaheb, the accounts officer – he was quite senior to even Colonel Mannaf. The latter would address him as "sir" but at the same time, he would not hesitate to curse him severely. There was Saif for physical training – he was an officer from the Engineering Core who had been with us at the prisoners of war camp. His wife was a Pakistani from Punjab. They were assigned the JCO house to live in.

The first step for the training was the arrival of the cars from which the brigade officers jumped out and pounced on the cadets. Orders were issued – "Unload your stuff, put them on your head and go stand in the field. Push them uphill to your assigned quarters, then climb down here and start frog-jumping." This final exercise was conducted thrice. Then the cadets were ordered to crawl through the gutter. Some of the cadets had arrived in suits, but now they were thoroughly confused. I watched the scene in silence while Colonel Mannaf occasionally peeked out from his office to check on the drill.

The storm of orders and yells at the new cadets went on till ten at night. When they were taken to the dining hall and shown where the water was, they rushed at it immediately as if there was a water-drinking competition going on. Food was served – roti and daal – all gone in an instant. After dinner, they were made to march on the road for a bit and then taken by the staff to their quarters. They were informed that every barrack had a platoon and when the whistle went off at 6 am, each cadet must come downstairs. The batment, however, would awaken them at 5 am when they would receive a cup of tea with a biscuit.

I was tasked with this job – somehow, I usually ended up with all the work!

The cadets who hadn't arrived on the first day were here now. I believe we had about 74 cadets in total. Twenty-four or five were counted out for each platoon. And on 9 Janary 1973, the BMA officially began its journey with a physical training. We did PT on one day only and a drill on the other, or sometimes, we did both. I proposed to Colonel Mannaf that we would have PT and drills every day, even though the latter was scored lower. But drills were essential to conditioning the body.

After the PT drill on the first day, the general jawans were given breakfast and sent to class. They had only one year. I was assigned to teach the normal subjects along with map reading, a class where I would usually hold with three platoons at once. The syllabus was decided including the regular army subjects and history, geography, English, Bangla, Science, and Math. While the Instructors, Staff, G1, G2, the

quarter master, and everyone else had arrived, the official permission to begin the BMA hadn't. Colonel Mannaf had been going to Dhaka frequently for this reason.

Meanwhile, the workload increased day by day. Costs increased as well because many items had to be bought on the spot. Commandant Mannaf returned from Dhaka with the motto of the Bangladesh Military Academy: "Ever high I hold my head." This was the contribution of Colonel Mannaf's mother, writer Zubaida Khanam.

Every morning I arrived at six for work and went home at ten after turning all the lights out, with just one hour for lunch at home. I don't know why I did this. Perhaps out of self-respect. The drill was conducted at the end of the road from the BMA where another road formed a T-junction with it. There were some tall hills on either side of these roads and I really liked this area. My job during the drill was to stand on top of one of the hills to observe the cadets and make notes. Some of them were stubborn. So I ordered them to a blanket parade. Every afternoon, one hour after lunch, around 3 pm, they would wrap themselves in blankets and walk all the way to Banglabazaar and back. Apparently, most of the cadets in this batch had been freedom fighters. To me, though, every officer was the same – whether they were freedom fighters or POWs. According to Colonel Mannaf, this was a very good batch. As a commandant, he was always very vigilant. He had plenty of office work as well, so Asma Amin arrived to assist him. Asma was always cheerful and Colonel Mannaf liked her. But he found peace in regularly directing every swear word he knew at her. Then Major Sadek arrived. On his first day, he said to me, "Shahid, I can't be a part of this. I'm not a teacher. I'm from the infantry, so if you have any job there, give it to me. Just make sure I'm not assigned any classes."

What could I possibly say to such words from a senior instructor?!

The second platoon commander, Mahbub, also arrived. As there was no more office space, I gave him a seat in my office. A sharp young man, I liked him instantly.

We couldn't possibly give the cadets any less food than allotted but I reduced the number of rotis to one for the overweight ones. There was vegetables in one meal, daal in the other – regular soldier fare. It surprised me to see how these cadets stuck around despite such mental torture. Why didn't they run away? On the other hand, I can't say enough about the hard work put in by each staff member. It would not be possible without their patriotism.

A freedom fighter naib subedar called Muslehuddin arrived. He was with the armed core (army tank). I assigned him different tasks but he didn't seem capable of doing any of them. I requested Commandant Mannaf to assign him somewhere – the laundry room, the barber shop, anywhere. It was done. Meanwhile, we noticed that among those who visited Shahriar's room, he was there.

In 1973, Bhutto's former Secretary, S. Kaiser, came to visit. He was a Secretary during the Pakistan regime and worked with Bhutto. They had a meeting one day which, possibly, took place at Dalim's house where Shahriar was also present. Dalim, Pasha, Huda, and some others were also present at the meeting – all from artillery. I think Ansar Shaheb was the CO. But everything was conducted in Dalim's name. He was a freedom fighter officer, an escapee from Pakistan. This meeting was questionable. It was possibly here that the assassination of Bangabandhu was planned. Who was there actually? How did they all come together some time before Bangabandhu was killed?

Rumors abounded. For instance – the freedom fighter officers were tired. They didn't come to work on time. They came in around ten or eleven and left early. Only a handful of them participated in the PT, drills, or games. I saw Dalim playing squash a couple of times. On the first day, he had come in blustering. Mannaf and I were in the middle of a game. Dalim waved his racquet at us and, with an air of command, he said, "Out, out, get out!" How dared he! What insubordination! He didn't care about his seniors, but then, on my yelling back, he left the room. Mannaf said, "Shahid, he's an FF." But I couldn't agree with the fact that just because he was an FF, he could behave any how he wanted with his seniors. The rest of them were rather nonchalant. There were parties here and there at night. Zia Shaheb was Deputy Chief of Army Staff and the cadet colleges were under his jurisdiction – as was the BMA Institution. So he also came to the parties. His brother-in-law, Cadet Sayeed Ishkandar, was here as well, but I never saw General Zia either ask about him or speak to him. And I don't believe I've ever seen Zia Shaheb make any comment about the BMA, ask any question, or express any excitement about it. There was a mango tree in front of the classroom – he would come and stand there. A few officers would come and stand around him. Standing there with his dark shades on, he listened more than he spoke. In fact, he stayed silent, and left after a short while. I have no idea where he went, whom he met, or what he did. Only later, I learned that he would go to BARD. Mahbub Alam Chashi was there. He was a Secretary, the number one officer in the Comilla BARD. If possible, there is still time to make inquiries into who visited BARD and why.

When the mess was completed, I assigned rooms to the officers accordingly. Commandant Mannaf had asked for portraits of Bangabandhu to be brought, so I brought them from Dhaka, hanging one up in the office, and one in the mess. One day, Mahbub and I were waiting for the sports to begin, when Shahriar came in. When he saw the portrait, he stood and saluted. Then he said, "Father of the Nation, my respected Abba, you're here as well? I will see you in hell!" We stood up instantly. Mahbub reacted, "Sir, you can't speak like that here."

Shahriar went quiet. I said, "Shahriar, what is the meaning of this? What are you trying to say?"

He said, "Aah! Don't worry. Of course, you'll be offended – you're a repatriated officer. So is he. We, the FFs don't care for him as a leader because he's a repatriat. We want the FFs to lead the country."

I went straight to Commandant Mannaf with this. Colonel Mannaf immediately called General Zia and reported the incident. Apparently, Bangabandhu was coming to the BMA in a couple of days. He hung up and, pulling at his hair, he muttered something under his breath, but he didn't say anything more to me.

I had been observing that all kinds of preparations were underway. There were meetings and lunches. Shahriar was making up songs about killing Bangabandhu and singing them. Everyone heard him and laughed. Mad, they said. Look at him in his boots, belt and cap, talking about killing Bangabandhu. But those who should have been on alert pretended not to notice. Everyone was waiting. Perhaps they suspected something was about to happen, but they feigned ignorance. And Shafiullah was there, a useless Chief of Army Staff. The FFs were all commanders, each one a Napoleon.

The next day when Bangabandhu arrived at the gates of the BMA, the cement hadn't dried. He himself laid the foundation stone in his name and then, instead of getting back in the car, he walked into the academy. We each rushed to our classrooms and he entered each one in turn. There were many others with him but I noticed that he did not hurry along. After his inspection, as he went towards the Cadets' Mess, he gave Commandant Mannaf a light tap on the head out of sheer happiness. Mannaf's cap fell off

at this and Bangabandhu said, “What is this then? You have such a large bald spot!” There was laughter all around but Mannaf didn’t smile. He was slightly embarrassed. Bangabandhu addressed him familiarly, “You’re Zubaida apa’s son and you’ve done a great job. You’re fulfilling my dream.”

Lieutenant Emdad from the Education Core was with us. He happened to come across our path and Bangabandhu, asking him to come closer, landed a hearty slap on his face. He was the younger brother of Dr. Khurshid, the freedom fighter. Later, when we asked him about the incident, he replied, “He doesn’t care about anyone’s self-respect. He seems to have forgotten that I grew up. He still sees me at the younger brother of Agartala’s Khurshid and enjoys humiliating me in public.” We couldn’t help bursting into laughter at this.

Bangabandhu and his team settled in at the Cadets’ Mess. Luckily, the furniture in the ante-room, drawing room and the dining room had all arrived that very day. We then went back to our own classes.

I had first seen Bangabandhu in Rajshahi when his eyes had been lowered, his head bowed. That same man today was so happy, so excited, such smiles. Seeing the Father of the Nation’s smile is a blessing.

Shafiullah, Ziaur Rahman, Mannaf, Huda and the ministers had tea with Bangabandhu and left.

I went to the mess to eat, and there I encountered Shahriar. He was loud – “I wasn’t allowed to go to the BMA today. Was I planning to murder him today? There is a limit to madness, of course! We’ve been posted to Comilla where we can get prepared.”

The very next day, Shahriar was posted elsewhere, but he didn’t go far and was still inside Comilla at the Bengal Regiment. In short, the group was an equivalent.

I was informed that Ameenah was flying here to Comilla. I rented a car from Colonel Mannaf to go to the airport to find that Ameenah had brought Nabeel and Anis. I was thunderstruck. Anis rushed to me and demanded to know, “Look, am I crying? Am I?” In a whisper, I asked Ameenah, “Whose idea was this?” Gravely, she answered, “Mine.” I heard that although my mother-in-law was crying for Anis, my father-in-law had stated that the child should live with his parents.

Anis began crying as soon as it got dark. I walked around with him to try and stop him but he refused, covering his eyes with his fingers.

Major Amjad came to see us and said, “Shahid, let’s take him for a ride in my car for some time.” So we went, but to no avail. On our way back home, I request Amjad to call my father-in-law and ask them to come here.

The next day, I went to the BMA but by afternoon, I had to return home. Anis was still in the same state and hadn’t slept all night. He had grown weak from crying and his eyes were dark. He had been hitting his mother all day. He had just one demand, “Will you feel good if they tie me up? I’m going to jump off this hill and die.” Even Nabil was trying to calm him down, but Anis refused to acknowledge him as brother or friend. He had lost his world, the Dhanmondi house, the lake, the roads, his walks and his talks. His Abba and Ammi were my father- and mother-in-law. We suffered his pain with him.

When I had just lain down with him at time, I heard the sound of a car outside. I went outside quickly to find my father-in-law climbing down from an army truck. Anis jumped up as soon as he saw him and his

hands came off his face. He leaped into his grandfather's arms and hugged him tightly, his Nana hugging him back. I was happy to see this, but sad as well. We had left our little Anis with his grandsparents and gone to Pakistan, returning after almost four years. We were now strangers to the child.

They went to bed in the room next to ours, but we couldn't sleep properly because all through the night, we heard them whispering to each other. In the morning, everything was back to normal. We were so relieved! Anis's Nana stayed for a few days, and then, one day, the two of them left for Dhaka by bus. But even after reaching his Nana's home, Anis was still suspicious. He was full of questions – was this the same house? The same window? The same bed?

In the last few days, Ameenah became familiar with my routine of waking up at five and disappearing by six. I came home for an hour at lunch, and then eleven at night. We ate whatever Ameenah cooked but there was nothing at home. No TV, or fridge, or radio, or sofas, or car, and so, no joy, no fun. There was one cane chair that looked like a throne. The rest of the chairs were made of nylon tape wrapped around iron rods. There was a table and a *shital pati*[58]. Colonel Mujib and Gogi who lived next door were very fond of us. Sometimes, they would often call us to eat with them. Ameenah spent her time chatting with Gogi until Ameenah finally said, "It's not possible to live like this anymore. I think I should live in Dhaka with Nabil and you can visit us sometimes." And so, it was decided. They flew back to Dhaka, which cost me thirty taka. This affected me a lot but all I thought of was their comfort.

We now began to take cadets beyond the BMA premises for training. On the first day, we had map reading. A model was developed and Colonel Sadek would take the first class. When he was informed of this, he came to say that it was impossible for him to take a three-hour class. He feared that Colonel Mannaf may appear. After much persuasion, he finally said, "Ok, but write everything down for me." I began to write with Mahbub helping me. The document became forty pages long! Colonel Sadek carried that around in his pocket and read it often. In fact, he even practiced in front of the mirror. On the morning of the class, he got hold of me and said, "Shahid, I can't do it."

I replied, "Sir, there's nothing we can do now."

I tried persuading him for a while until he said, "Why don't you give the commandant a precis and make him stay at the office?"

The commandant read precis everyday until two in the morning. We had been instructed that nothing would be taught to the cadets without his seeing it first. He had collected every kind of learning tool for us – books, exercise copies, and materials from West Point, Sandhurst, and Australian Academy. To protect Colonel Sadek, I went to the commandant's office and said, "Sir, you have to go through this precis today. I'm sorry that I didn't show you last night." Without a hint of irritation, he began to read the precis. As he read, he asked, "Isn't the model discussion supposed to take place today?"

I replied, "Sir, I'm arranged for it. Colonel Sadek is taking the class."

He put on his cap and said, "Come, let's go and see." There was no way for me to stop him, so, helplessly, I followed. As he was about to enter the classroom, Mahbub ran out the back door. We went to sit in the gallery – the commandant in front, I behind. Shortly, the Commandant took off his cap and began to pull

[58] Made of a plant fiber, this is a thin mat that remains cool and is often used to lie on.

at his hair. Then I saw that he was sweating – and there, at the other end, most of the cadets were sleeping. The cadets had come to class after the PT drill and the breakfast following. They had fallen asleep because the class was no fun but Colonel Sadek was ploughing through my forty-page document. Apparently that was the model discussion!

Colonel Mannaf descended, and I tagged along. As soon as he sat down in his office, he sadi, "Shahid, you, Badar and Mahbub should hold a model discussion class on ground reality." I didn't dare say no to him, so I obeyed. Colonel Sadek didn't have to take any more classes after this. He was saved – and so were we.

The reason I have described this incident is to point out that not everyone is capable of everything. Not every job is for everyone.

When Kala Mahmud was removed from office, Imamuzzaman arrived to take his place. He was a freedom fighter, a commendable officer. On 25th March, the Pakistanis had locked a group of peaceloving, decent officers in a room in Comilla Cantonment and killed them by brushfire. Imamuzzaman, with a bullet in his body, had crawled out from under the pile of corpses and to safety through a window and escaped to India. Later he became a freedom fighter. Did he have any other choice?

I'd been to Dhaka a couple of times within this time but it was mostly for official reasons. I would, however, spend the night at the house, and return with supplies.

My in-laws and the whole family came to visit us in Comilla. They stayed for a few days and we truly enjoyed the time. My father-in-law would shop for us himself and we ate well these few days. And there was the conversation, of course – only, unfortunately, I couldn't be a part of it.

After a lot of persuasion, we managed to get Abba and Ma to Comilla as well. Abba didn't usually travel anywhere but they stayed with me for a whole month.

I tried to stay home longer on Sundays. Mujib and Gogi cooked for Abba, Amma, and me. Abba liked the name "Gogi" very much. Ekramullah and Nellie also treated us to dinner one night and Abba remained a happy soul. He could walk freely here and look at the hills. One day, in the course of conversation, I asked, "Abba, I've heard Ma speak some words that are her very own. Where did she acquire them?"

I had never seen Abba laugh out loud. He smiled quietly and said, "Your mother is Jessore's Shakespeare."

He searched through his suitcase then and retrieved some papers for me. "Even though the list is incomplete, most of your mother's words are written in here."

The day was a Sunday, so I had some time on my hands. Abba began to read to me from the papers and Amma would come around now and then to see us. She used one of her expressions now: "You and your *kusute pana*." This phrase meant "joking" or "jokes." Then there was *temok* (showing anger), *sharbeshar* (speaking English fluently), *do domot* (folding a sheet or something similar), *nikchune* (making someone laugh without reason), *maechka deowa* (beating up), *bukshini* (fainting), *haateshon* (carrying a disabled person around), *gadabhora* (eating to one's fill), *tarijoot* (eating in comfort), *ghurnighurli* (taking a quick walk around the bazaar), *doo-o shorshe* (requesting earnestly), *ghichute* (tiny), *dhamachimara* (avoiding work by deception), *nipish* (grinding spices finely).

Abba said, “I’ve listed them here. Let them remain. You can see it some day if you wish. It will remind you of your mother. Just remember that your mother is very accomplished. Otherwise, none of you would be where you are. What could I have done? It was all her doing.”

We knew this was the truth.

Baba-Ma left our house and went to Boro Bhai’s house in Dhaka. Before the bus left, I handed them a package of the famous Comilla rasmalai[59]. Ma left, and with her, the suitcase which contained her words.

A few days later, Boro Bhai and Bhabi drove to Comilla from Chittagong. They stayed with us for one night. Boro Bhai had left the jute mill and joined BTC where he received a good salary. In the morning, I said to me, “I can’t drive anymore.”

Boro Bhai immediately seated me in the driver’s seat of his car and got into the passenger seat. Resassured, I drove slowly. It had been so long since I drove!

Ameenah casually informed me that she had gone to visit a major’s house downstairs. His rations consisted of a leg of mutton, whole chickens, fish, etc. Major Shaheb was at the ASC. Ameenah commented, “Boro Bhai, make sure that Shahid’s posting is at the ASC. That place is quite wet and here we are, suffering in this place. Shahid is in pain. That’s why he dips his roti in sugar to eat. Look! He has sores on his body and his toenails are falling off.” I only learned later that diabetes and the sugared bread were responsible for my condition.

Boro Bhai had a good laugh at the idea of the wet posting but it never occurred to him to send Shombhu fifty taka, even though his salary at the time was a few thousand taka. Life is so un-understanding.

[59] Cheeseballs soaked in thick cream – a delicacy

Chapter Twenty-three

Graduation of the First BMA Cadets

11 January 1975 was to be the graduation day of the BMA's SSC first course. This would be the first graduating students of an independent Bangladesh. Bangabandhu would be present and this would make the event more festive and memorable. Bangabandhu would be accompanied by the ministers, secretaries, ambassadors, central leaders, along with local dignitaries. The program would also be attended by the senior officers of the army, navy, air force, and police. There would be around five or six hundred guests who would be having lunch. Commandant MAnnaf said, "Shahid, we have to prepare the polo ground of the Bengal Regiment for the graduation parade. You have to take responsibility of it."

I went to see the grounds and realized that we would need to make some changes. The ground opposite the seating area was hilly and stretched for some distance. We would cut some stairs into this hill so that cadets could climb up and over to the other side. I scoped out the guest seating area, the point where the parade would begin and end, and mapped it out to show Commandant Mannaf. He was not the type to understand without seeing something for himself. He checked out my map at least ten times. We began work, when he called me to say that lunch would be served at the officers' mess and that I would have to arrange this too. "You will hire a cook from Dhaka and find out how catering can be done." I was also overseeing the work of creating a garden, the slope, planting the grass, and so on, at the BMA. Someone had asked Mahbub in Dhaka, "What does Major Shahid do over there?" Major Mahbub had replied, "What can I say? He even cuts the grass at the BMA – so you can tell that there's nothing he doesn't do."

We began practice with different exercises. Three days and three nights of Advance to Contract. Then there were retreats, attacks, and swimming across the river. The Commandant had included everything possible in that final practice. This would determine who would receive the Sword of Honor or the Cane. There would be a first position, second, third, and fourth, which would be the deciding factor for assigning to a particular arms. During the practice, a kid from Dhanmondi, Dilu, became disrespectful. There was some soil in the spot where the trench was supposed to be. So Dilu began to dig the ground next to the road. I asked, "Why here?" He replied, "Can anyone dig a trench over there?"

"You are out." In one shot, he was dismissed. The next day, he had to pack up and leave.

The platoon commander in the army had such authority.

The exercises were extremely strenuous. This was the survival course. Mahbub and I had to work very hard during this time. And so did Colonel Mannaf. The rest worked hard too, but we were the ones losing sleep. After three days and nights, on a cold winter night, the Commandant came to me and said, "Shahid, stay with me. I will take over from you."

He had been involved in everything so far, and he was willing to take over now too! I believe he began to give exercise data to Moin, Nazmul, and Jahir. He made them read maps, gave them on the moves, and advance to contract. Later, attacks. Moin got through but Nazmul didn't. He took Jahir alone. This went on till almost dawn. Whatever occurred during company attacks took place between Commandant Mannaf and Jahir, with the latter passing with flying colors. The thought that even I couldn't have passed this way crossed my mind. The exercises ended when the sun rose.

We went to the BMA now and began work on the parade ground in earnest because there was no paved area here. I had rollers running over the ground to smoothen it and had stairs and platforms built. Ameenah, Nabil and Anis had also arrived in the meantime. Shah Alam and his cook (they worked at Chalet at the time) were brought from Dhaka along with the necessary supplies and waiters. Prawns were ordered from Daudkandi and *rasmalai* from Comilla while Shah Alam cooked everything he was good at.

One by one, everyone arrived on the morning of the 11th. Bangabandhu was put up at the Brigade Mess and the Commandant took me along to visit. However, I was made to stand by the whole time in case something was needed.

Commandant Mannaf handed Bangabandhu a copy of the speech that he would be giving as the Chief Guest to the first graduates of the BMA. He said, "Sir, here is your parade speech. Your address to the cadets and the guests is all typed here."

Bangabandhu replied, "Have you ever seen me read out a speech?" Mannaf said, "Sir, I had this written for you because it's a graduation ceremony. You will have twenty minutes. At the end of that time, the Adjutant will begin giving his orders. You have to confer the Sword of Honor and the Cane. Of course, your speech will come first and then the declaration of the end of the program. At the end, though, the cadets will still have some exercises for display. These cadets will then graduate to become officers. Then we will go to the Mess, sir, where lunch arrangements have been made."

Once he finished, Bangabandhu addressed him familiarly, "You read, I'll listen."

This was the first time Mannaf Shaheb clearly read out a piece of writing in Bangla. Bangabandhu held his head in his hands and listened. Then he said, "Did you say I have to finish this speech in twenty minutes?" Mannaf replied, "Yes, sir, in twenty minutes." Bangabandhu said, "Fine. I'll do it in your twenty minutes."

That speech had been written in collaboration by the Education Core. It had been prepared in English first and then translated in Bangla. A little later, the Commandant told me we could leave and he would follow a little later.

Everyone was dressed in black coats. The ambassadors and high commissioners in suit and tie; army, air force, navy, and police in their official uniform. I went to stand at the cadet ground where the cadets had already assembled and Adjutant Major Anwar had come in on horseback. Bangabandhu and his accompanying guests took their seats on the dais. Commandant Mannaf snatch the little black stick from my hand – we were all standing in the back.

Then began a unique moment in the history of the Bangladesh Army – the Passing Out Parade. Earlier, though, there had been a huge quarrel between all the platoon commanders and Commandant Mannaf about who should receive the Sword and who the Cane. Finally, it was decided that Jahir would receive the Sword; Moin, the Cane; Nazmul was third, and Rahim, fourth. Each was assigned a core, although usually, the first four could have their choice of core. The rest were assigned to different areas based on grades and balance. We were very impressed by the parade. The parade Adjutant, Major Anwar, was a tall Freedom Fighter. He looked extremely handsome on horseback.

When Bangabandhu began his speech, there was no sign of the copy of the speech that Commandant Mannaf had given him. Alarmed, we listened as he spoke, but soon we were surprised to hear him saying more or less what Commandant Mannaf had read to him. The undulations in the speech became extraordinarily poetic in his baritone voice.

Then the rest of the parade took place. It seemed as though Bangabandhu once turned towards Mannaf as if to ask, "So, were you scared?"

Of course Mannaf had been scared, so scared that he was sweating.

The cadets climbed up the steps in rhythm. They looked so good that tears of joy rolled down my cheeks – as they did for many others.

Ameenah was there with the others, watching this Passing Out ceremony. I rushed to the mess to check on everything even though I had checked once last night. I had moved the pots and other supplies around for inspection. Waiters at each table had been apprised of their duties and they had practiced how to serve as well. Everything looked fine now. Shah Alam was keeping his sharp eyes on it all.

At the appointed time, the guests arrived. So did Bangabandhu. The food was served buffet-style, clockwise. Space was short, and seating had been arranged on the lawn by the field and below. Guests had to climb down the stairs to get there. Commandant Mannaf, I and several others did not eat with the guests. Bangabandhu noticed the Zia was nowhere in sight and asked him to be called. When I went to look for him, I found him sitting downstairs. I said, "Sir, Bangabandhu is looking for you."

Zia came, donned with his dark glasses and dark mood. He said to the ambassadors sitting around Bangabandhu, "Have some rasmalai. It's a Comilla specialty."

After lunch, there were compliments and praise all around for the food. Commandant Mannaf was very happy with me. I returned home at the end of the day with a basketful of praise.

At home, Anis had found a beret from somewhere and had put it on. He had tucked his pants into his socks and was marching around with a stick in his hand and a pistol at his waist. Jishu was taking photos, a lot of them. We sent the photos to be color-processed in London and never saw them again.

The first gentlemen's cadet course of an independent Bangladesh was complete. Another course, SSC-2, would begin, but before that, the BMA went on vacation for a few days. I also took Ameenah and the boys to Chittagong. My friend from Jessore was a businessman there and we went to visit him. Kamal's wife, Kumkum, was the daughter of my father's friend. Their son, Mithu, and daughter, Nahid, were Nabil's age. When I asked what his name was, the boy replied, "Mithu Shaheb." The three of them had a lot of fun. Kumkum repeatedly said, "Shombhu Bhai, since you won't do any job, why don't you join Kamal? He's having a hard time managing everything alone." I replied, "We'll see what happens in time."

We went to the Chittagong Club and met Engineer Mosharrof – a freedom fighter, our friend from the Lahore Engineering University. Then he took us to his home for a meal. He was a part-time businessman, part-time politician. I heard some stories about the Liberation War from him. And about Ziaur Rahman as well.

Kamal drove us to Cox's Bazaar where we stayed at a resthouse belonging to the Roads and Highways department. We browsed the little shops by the seashore that sold showpieces made from shells. There were some restaurants and market in the town, the former merely tiny thatched huts. Mosharrof owned a hotel named Saimon. There were probably just 20-30 foreigners on the beach while some locals took walks there in the mornings and evenings. We liked the atmosphere of the place. After a couple of days, we went to Dhaka through Comilla.

Nabil had been admitted into Holy Cross. His mother or his Nani would take him to school. Sometimes it fell to Hasan too. Nabil was tutored by his Nana which Anis would listen to. We visited a couple of people in Dhaka, including Purana Paltan. We went to brother-in-law, Mustafa Sarwar's home in Narayanganj. There we heard many unknown stories about the Liberation War. A picture of his in uniform, holding his rifle was displayed. It had been taken at Jessore. There was one advantage of being with Mustafa dulaBhai – he did all the talking. He showed us his father, Osman Shaheb's home, the venue, probably, of Awami League's first meeting. Osman Shaheb had been deeply involved in the creation of the Awami League. In fact, at the beginning, he even paid for some of the smaller expenses. We also met his siblings. He had more than one mother – we met them too. Apparently, Sarwar Bhai owned a house very close to Bangabandhu's home at Road 32. We had no idea about it. He was the Cultural Secretary of the Awami League.

I returned to the BMA after the vacation. The second SSC batch would arrive soon. They were identified as the SSC-2. I began my work with renewed vigor – this time, the work was much easier. Earlier, more than the cadets, it was we who suffered during the drills. We had to scout the area first, climbing hills and treading through swamps, before we could take the cadets through them. Now we didn't need to do that anymore. Then there was the job of writing precis. We had to write down everything that we taught the cadets. We had draw all the pictures and the maps, get them approved by Commandant Mannaf before we could communicate them to the cadets. Now, that work was reduced too.

During this period, many officers came and went. Major Amjad had already left and so did Major Salam. Hannan Shah was the G2. I believe he became G1 later, but there were just the three of us platoon commanders except that our platoons were switched. The work, of course, was the same, although now, the cadets didn't have to eat on the floor. In addition, they got extra seating in the ante-room. Some new work was also in progress. I had taken all the cadets and planted trees with them throughout the BMA. The motto, "Ever high I hold my head," was displayed over the entrance, a motto that made my heart swell with pride.

My salary was now seven hundred taka of which I sent five hundred to Ameenah in Dhaka and one hundred to Jessore. My monthly expenses went from that last one hundred. On top of that, I had to make trips from Comilla to Dhaka. The bus fare was seven taka and the baby taxi was two taka. Our currency was now the taka. My batman made me roti and, for a few days, I would often have to eat that dipped in sugar water. Seeing my state, Colonel Mujib would often say, "Come have dinner with me" and I would go. Gogi would be embarrassed to have unannounced guests as the menu was plain. She would fry up an egg and serve the leftovers from lunch with roti that she herself made. Mujib was a jolly man and so was I, so our time together was well-spent. Problems arose only when Mujib would suddenly turn to Gogi and ask for dessert! Then Gogi would let him have it. She would yell, "Are you mad? When I don't even have any meal to serve, you're asking for dessert?"

“Okay. Can we have some tea then?”

“Where’s the milk?”

“We don’t need milk. Just give us some tea with sugar. That’ll do.”

Even if Mujib had no soup, dessert, or milk at his home, we were not short on stories.

We began to hear rumors that the BMA would soon be shifted from Mainamati to Bhatiari in Chittagong.

I often travelled to Dhaka or Comilla for work. Once, in Sylhet, during a drill, I heard thousands of people in a rally, chanting slogans: “We want ARM Enamul Huq’s head!” Mannaf Shaheb asked me, “What are they saying, Shahed?” I tried to listen closely and said, “It sounds like they want my father-in-law.” He said, “You know what? Go to Dhaka tonight after the drill.”

When I arrived at the house at 13/4, I became certain that the chant for ARM Enamul Huq and my father-in-law were one and the same. He had written a book that had angered the clerics. They were demanding for his punishment. One thing was noticeable here – when it came to any issue raised again Bangabandhu or the Awami League or the Awami Government, all other parties became united – whether it was the left party, JASAD, NAKSHAL, Shorbohara or fundmentalists. They became united and a cap went on everyone’s head. They had done this in the past too and were doing it now. They would likely continue to do so in the future.

By late afternoon, it became obvious that things were not looking good. It would be wise to leave the house as soon as possible. Coincidentally, Reza was travelling to the US that day and under the pretext of seeing him off at the airport, we discretely left the house and took refuge in Salauddin Chacha’s house in Gulshan. Salauddin Shaheb was my father-in-law’s friend and had attended the Presidency College in Calcutta together.

Seeing that the situation was not improving, I went to the SB to inquire. EA Chowdhury was in charge here. Relatives advised me to see him as he could possibly find a solution to the situation. I donned my uniform on purpose and went the SB office. The DIG, Murshed Shaheb, left his chair to come and ask me, “Sir, what do you want?” I told him. The DIG seated me, and then went inside only to come out again to say, “Sir, you’ve been summoned inside immediately.” Seated inside was Brigadier Rouf of DGIF. He knew me. It was like finding heaven in one’s hand. They had already come to know that I was ARM Enamul Huq’s son-in-law. As soon as I was seated, they asked, “Where is your father-in-law now? We need to save him.”

I took my time and replied, “He’s with me, but not in the house. Elsewhere.”

They said, “It’ll be difficult to save him. Give him to us. We’ll put him in jail for a few days under the Special Power Act and have the news printed in newspapers. You’ll see that everything will eventually subside. Then we will release him again.”

It didn’t take me long to figure out what they meant by “release.” This is what would destroy the country one day. If this went on, these people themselves or with help from others would one day form a government. The country would be Bangladesh only in name, the rest would become Pakistani; and they would introduce themselves in different ways for some time. First, they would take control of the finances,

and then education. Then they would take power. So, don't let them go. Don't compromise Don't take bribes. Do not mix with them, even in the dark of night. Because you're doing this, there will be disaster.

I said, "He's ill."

They said, "He will receive division and we'll admit him into the hospital."

Again, I said, "Sir, please send someone with me. I will be there to ensure that he is taken to jail."

They agreed. E A Chowdhury called the State Minister, Captain Mansur Shaheb, on the phone and said, "Sir, things are being taken care of. His son-in-law is here. He will stay with us and escort him to jail. I'm letting the jailor Shamsur Rahman know. Everything will be fine."

Now I realized why DGIF Brigadier Shaheb was here. They gave their car and men, and I escorted my father-in-law to prison. Later, I went to deliver a mattress, pillow, sheets, and clothes. In the morning, the headline on the *Daily Ittefaq* announced, "ARM Enamul Huq Arrested."

I returned to the BMA after taking care of everything. Mannaf Shaheb listened to my account and looked grave. After this, I had to make many trips to Dhaka, the prison, and the SB. In the meantime, I had become friends with the DIG, Murshed.

On 3 January 1975, I went in to the office to find Murshed Shaheb sitting with his head on the table. I asked, "What happened?" He shook his head as he took me in to the larger room inside. There was nothing but a chair there – but there was blood – a lot of it – and some clothes. I demanded, "What is this?"

"Why? Haven't you seen the papers?"

No, I had not seen the papers. He supplied the information: "Shiraj Shikder is dead. In the middle of the night."

Hearing Shiraj Shikder's name, I thought to myself that I wanted none of this. As I left the room after getting my permission slip to see my father-in-law, I asked, "Who did it?"

He pointed towards E A Chowdhury's office and said, "He knows."

It all became clear now. I asked again, "Were you here all night?"

"Yes."

I left the room with the slip.

Chapter Twenty-four

Once Again at the Bangladesh Military Academy

I returned to the BMA but this time, I had to gather my courage to do so. We had good students in the new batch again but I was uneasy because I felt that something was going on and I couldn't put my finger on it. The Second Artillery had left and quite a few of the Muktijoddhas had been assigned posts. Those who used to come here before – Faruk, Ziaur Rahman – were now in Dhaka. There was an air of expectancy everywhere. I asked Mahbub, but he knew nothing. He didn't go to anyone's house or party. If I asked him anything, he would tell me a story about Muktijuddho. One day, I asked him, "So, what did you gain by accepting the two years of seniority?" He burst out laughing at my words: "Sir, you're so foolish. They didn't give us two years' seniority – *you* were the ones who were demoted two years instead of being courtmartialled. They insulted you. If you want to remain in the army, you have to take this humiliation." He laughed again. Still I said, "Forget that. I want to know what you got out of it." In response, he showed me his thumb, indicating that he had received nothing. I was silent.

Mahbub said, "You'll see everything, sir."

It had already been a few months since my father-in-law was sent to jail. I didn't like seeing him in prison. I went to meet Mustafa dulaBhai but it wasn't clear how much he knew, but it wasn't possible for me to ask him anything directly either. Later, he brought up the subject himself. "I know your father-in-law. He's a wise man. Why don't you do something? Get a paper signed by him with words to the effect of 'My book has been banned, and I will never write another book like this'. And when you come tomorrow, wear your uniform."

I did what he asked and he took me to the Home Minister, Captain Mansur Shaheb's office. When I handed him the letter, he asked, "What's up?" DulaBhai burst into speech and I couldn't even understand everything he said. But Mansur Shaheb must have. He pointed at the application and said, "Leave it with me. Let me take a look."

We left. The next day, Mustafa Bhai called me and said, "It's done. He'll be released today. The letter has been sent to the prison."

I immediately went to the jailhouse and returned with my father-in-law. Then I brought them with me to Comilla. Mannaf Shaheb came to my father-in-law one day and said, "Sir, you can't do anything that may affect your family. Shahid is here and if you need anything, I'll see to it. Stay here for a few days."

My in-laws stayed for a few days and then returned to Dhaka.

The Dhanmondi house, in the meantime, was in a sorry state. The roof was caving in and rainwater was seeping through. We would need to either demolish this house to build a new one, or build another floor above it to fix the problem. It was decided that another floor would be constructed. I helped how much I could. Finally, after much effort, the third floor was done and with the roof slanted correctly, the waterlogging stopped. Now my father-in-law could rent out the apartment for a decent amount.

Towards the end of my time at the BMA, we started exercises at the Mritinga Tea Garden. It was a little distant from Comilla where a man named Nasim was Manager. Mahbub and I cleared some space atop a hill and set up our tent with two rope cots in it. On the first day, there was some briefing and some

exercises. After a final round, we went into our tent at the end of the day at ten. Perhaps it was around five in the morning or thereabouts when the field telephone rang. I picked up the phone to hear our Commandant Mannaf's grave voice at the other end. He said, "Shahid, most likely, the president is gone." Stunned, I asked, "Sir, how?"

With a jolt, he said, "I don't know. I'll let you know when I do." And he hung up immediately.

When the phone rang again after a half hour, I picked up. This time, he said, "Bangabandhu and his family are dead."

When I asked again, "How?" he said, "Don't say another word. Just listen. The exercises will be shut down. Bring Mahbub's, Badar's and your platoons to one location. Give the cadets some breakfast in the meantime. Amsa Ameen is with the Demo Company. I want all the companies and the commanders to come to Comilla in battle formation. We must protect the cadets and we must be careful. Three things may happen. First, India may attack. Secondly, there may be a civil war. Or third, there may be a counter-coup. We're on the road." He gave me the location. "When you get there, we'll head to Comilla together."

When he hung up, I sat there, dazed. Mahbub was a smart young man. I didn't need to explain much for him to get the full picture. I called Subedar Akand and asked him to assemble all the cadets as we were going to Comilla. A while later, he returned to report that he had conveyed my instructions clearly. Some of them were upset at the news while others refused to eat their food. I said, "Bring the food with you."

We went into battle formation and presented ourselves at Colonel Mannaf's headquarters. Then we progressed slowly towards Comilla. There were no cars on the road, but there were small crowds standing by the roadside, equally stunned. We reached Comilla in the late afternoon. I saw to things and then went to my residence.

Commandant Mannaf ordered for classes to begin on the very next day. The Demo Company surrounded the Academy, guarding it. At home, there was my new batman, Obaidul. I had dismissed Hakim because he had been stealing. Obaidul, a smart young man from Gopalganj, Faridpur, took good care of me. Today, however, he was in a sorry state. He kept crying. He had neither eaten nor cooked anything. When he saw me, he went to his company, still crying, to get some food. We both ate a little from there.

The next morning, I went to the BMA. There was an air of gloom and no one spoke a word. Everyone seemed to be shocked into silence. The daily routine of drills and PT began but no one felt inclined to move. The staff members were in a similar condition. The only cry: How could this have happened? Will we still have our country?

I returned home in the evening, having had lunch at the mess. Obaidul was still in tears. He came to me just once and asked, "Sir, won't you all do anything?"

What could I tell Obaidul? How much power did I, or we, have?

I wrote my resignation letter the next day and handed it to Comanndant Mannaf. He wanted to know why I was resigning and I said that I was no longer mentally stable. I couldn't work anymore. He told me not to be too hasty.

A few days later, I asked him, “Sir, what happened to my resignation?” Patiently, he said, “I’m looking into it.”

With great force, I said, “Sir, I will not stay here. Please send my application to the Army Headquarters and give me leave.” But his only response was, “I’ll see.”

I was adamant too. I would not work here anymore. I had to be released. Mannaf scolded me.

“Do you know what could happen? You can’t even imagine! I’ve spoken to the Army Headquarters for a new posting. When things improve, you can try to get released from the Army. Now, hand over your duties to Mizan.”

On November 3, 1975, Khaled Mosharrof led a coup and captured General Zia. Some changes were taking place at the Bangabhaban. By evening, we heard that four of the top Awami League leaders of the Mujibnagar Government, Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Mansur Ali, and Qamaruzzaman, had been killed.

Early on the morning of November 4, Commandant Mannaf said, “We have to expel Syed Nazrul Islam’s son, Cadet Shafat.”

I exited his office, and then, after some thought, I went back in. “I can’t do this,” I said. The Commandant replied, “Then you can tell him what happened and be responsible for his safety.”

I returned to my office and sent for Shafat. He came and stood at attention. Without asking him to relax, I said, “Shafat, I have some bad news for you. You must bear it and not break down.”

He said, “Sir, please tell me.”

“Your father has died.”

Surprised, Shafat asked, “How, sir?”

“An accident.”

Calmly, he said, “How is that possible? Wasn’t he in jail?”

I said, “Your father and three other leaders were killed in that jail.”

I couldn’t say anything more. He kept standing there, silent and still. Only the tears ran down his cheeks. I gave him some time to grieve and then said, “Havildar Mujib will escort you to Lalmai Mountain and leave you there for a couple of days so that no one can come here and hurt you.”

That very night, Mannaf informed me that I had been posted to the Navy in Dhaka as the GE. I left for Dhaka the following day and went to the Army Headquarters. I asked a lot of questions but found no trace of my submitted J Form, that is, my resignation letter. I then went to our ENC branch and learned, again, of my posting. I also found out that Jahed Latif was there as well but he had also been posted elsewhere. I was to take over from him.

Chapter Twenty-five

I Join the Bangladesh Navy

I spoke to Jahed Latif on the phone. We decided that he would come to Dhanmondi to pick me up on November 7. I put on my uniform on the morning of the 7th. Everything was worn out from the Military Academy. Even my beret was dirty. I twisted my mustache upwards and pulled it into shape, into a handle-bar mustache.

Obaidul came in anxiously from his wanderings outside. "Sir, there's been a coup. You'd better not go out."

"I'm going to the Navy offices in Banani. What's the harm in that? The coup will stay in its own place and I will be in mine."

Jahed Latif arrived and said, "Shahid, I heard all kinds of rumors. Do you think it's safe to go?"

I said, "You've been able to come this and we're only going to Banani. Let's go."

The car was probably a '38 model and its color was jaded, like a tree trunk. There was no roof but it moved. Jahed Latif was at the wheel and I sat in the passenger seat. Once we headed out, I thought we should avoid the problematic roads. Jahed agreed and we took a short cut. With Shahbagh on our left, we drove through Mymensingh Road. There were no other cars in sight. There was a crowd near Farmgate, with some soldiers, havildars, and JCO shahebs from the army. The sound of a speech floated to our ears: "Soldiers and the common people are brothers." And then, "We want the blood of the officers!" I was astonished – what were the soldiers saying? When did this happen? We had entered the area and even got salutes. Maybe my dirty beret on my shoulder covered my rank or they didn't think an officer would dare to approach now. They kept saluting. Protocol demanded that the second CT would return the salute, so accordingly, I did my part. Jahed said, "Shahid, do you hear anything? Can you tell what's going on?" I said, "I can but don't say anything. Just drive." There was a limit to daring! We drove on in God's name and got through.

"Let's not try to get to Banani," said Jahed. "We'll get stuck at Mohakhali. Let's go to the Engineering Directorate instead."

By now, the sweat had dried on my skin in the open jeep and my knees stopped shaking. There were soldiers all around us as well as the public. Some had even entered the Cantonment. We left the car and entered the Engineering Directorate. Even there, we found one or two of them in different offices. We found Colonel Salauddin in one room. He had been in the army a while and had a dirty mouth. He and I could easily compete. We saw several others in the room, so we asked, "What's the matter?" They replied, "Don't you know? The soldiers are capturing the officers. They may have killed some along with even their wives."

"What are you saying?!" I gasped.

In return, they asked, "Where have you come from?"

We told them and Colonel Salauddin said, "It's a good thing you came to the headquarters. The Second Artillery, 4th Bengal is just ahead. Everything's happening here. They brought Zia Shaheb here."

I asked, “Sir, who are the perpetrators?”

“Who knows? But we think Khaled, Shafaat Jamil, Brigade Commander of 46th, and a few others with them, like Major Hafiz, Captain Taj, may be holding Zia Shaheb. There are others with them as well.”

Jahed pulled me to one side and said, “Shahid, I don’t think we should stay here. We need to leave.”

We tiptoed out, got back in our jeep and on to Mymensingh Road through the shortcut. We turned towards the rail tracks and drove. We felt calm at last. A little further on, we noticed some trenches to our left and two tin barracks to our right. The MES office was located in one of them and the GE Shaheb’s office was at one end. We both went into his office and let out a sigh of relief. The peon, Taher, had served me well before and done a lot of work. He was very smart and he was here. Later on, we learned that his wife was here too. After he served us tea, Jahed produced cigarettes and the two of us smoked like chimneys. We also had a couple of cups of tea each. Someone from the Navy of approximately the Subedar Major rank came in and spoke to Jahed, “Sir, there’s grave danger – the army is headed this way. You’re in army uniforms - how can we make them understand that you don’t belong to the army? Could you quickly don some civilian clothes? If anyone comes this way, say that you’re civilian officers with the MES. They’re all civilian officers here.”

Jahed asked, “Has the DWCE[60] come?” He was also a civilian named Hafiz.

“No, sir.”

Taher brought us civilian clothes. Our lives were in danger, so we quickly put those clothes on. However, no one came this way. Afternoon rolled in and our stomachs growled. There was no food in the canteen and Taher could only get us some biscuits from there. We ate them dry first, and then dipped in tea. Jahed Latif said, “Shahid, since Dhaka is not safe right now, let’s go to Chittagong tomorrow. The handing-taking over will take place there.”

I said, “Brilliant idea, but, right now, how do we get home?”

Thank God, there was a phone in the room and there wasn’t any place in Dhaka that Jahed did not know. Within an hour, we heard that Ziaur Rahman Shaheb had gained command control of the army.

This all happened on November 7, 1975. Along with others, it was that Shahriar who had been responsible for the murders on August 15, 1975. It was he who branded the foreheads of the people with shame. On November 3, Khaled-Shafaat directed a counter-coup and imprisoned Ziaur Rahman, forcing Sayem to become President at gunpoint. Another coup took place on November 7 and we heard rumors that Khaled, Huda, Haider, and a number of others had perished. And those who had murdered Bangabandhu had already been granted safe passage with indemnity. This was the day on which Jahed Latif and I were supposed to hand over-take over responsibilities.

News came that General Ziaur Rahman had ordered for the murder of the officers to stop. Only then would he support the soldiers. That was the first time we heard this order – something we had wanted to hear.

[60] Director, Works and Chief Engineer

Like turtles emerging from their shells, Jahed Latif and I peeked out slowly and after looking both ways, we headed out on Mymensingh Road.

I dropped Jahed on Bailey Road and came to Dhanmondi. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief on seeing me. They wanted to know where I had been all day, what I heard, and what I had seen. I had only one thing to say, "I saw nothing. Heard nothing. We were in the office all day, handing over and taking over. What I saw on the streets in random places isn't really worth mentioning."

The next day I received orders to pick up Jahed and go to the airport. Apart from a slightly stricter enforcement of regulations, I saw nothing unusual there. An officer had been murdered. One or two soldiers who knew us told us to go home. We didn't listen and got on the plane.

A run-down car was waiting at the Chittagong Airport for us. Jahed encountered a contractor who asked where we were headed. When he heard our response, he said, "Sir, haven't you heard that there's been another coup?"

"What? When did that happen?"

"This morning."

What a bother! Had an epidemic of coups started? Was it some virus?

Jahed and I had a bit of a laugh at this – as if coups were something to laugh about. The civilian contractor's, though, was dry and anxious. He said, "Sir, you won't be able to go. They're planning to kill the officers."

We were startled by this – what was this now? We couldn't get back on the plane and return to Dhaka either as it had already left on its return journey. After a bit of thought, the two of us fished our civilian clothes from our bags and donned them. Confident in the belief that God would take care of us, we loaded ourselves into the contractor's car. He sat in the front seat and we sat in the back. We got stuck on the road somewhere just a few yards from the Chittagong Navy. The entire road was occupied, so we decided not to proceed. We wanted to back up and leave the area, but it was impossible. The road was blocked from both ends. The contractor got down and, after asking around, returned to report that the number one of the Navy, Khan Shaheb, was coming. Hearing the name, Khan Shaheb, on the contractor's lips, Jahed turned to me and said, "Shahid, M H Khan is a fantastic person. He will be able to bring things under control."

So we waited. And waited. In the meantime, the morning dragged on into afternoon. Finally, we heard that the Vice Admiral, M H Khan, had arrived. Everything was in his control now. When we were finally able to move, we drove directly to Boro Bhai's house on Joy Mountain. Bhabi was astonished to see us and asked, "Have you eaten?"

I said, "No. We headed out in the morning and are now coming from the Navy. They're treating everyone to bullets. We didn't want any, so we came here."

She asked, "Why?"

"Don't worry about these things. There's trouble and I want no part of it. We're going to stay here. Now, please give us some food."

Bhabi served us bread, fried eggs, and tea. When Boro Bhai returned in the evening, we chatted for a while.

The next morning, Jahed said to me, “Shahid, why don’t we go to Kaptai instead of the Chittgong Navy?”

So we did – and really enjoyed our time. This is where I had begun my life. We passed Kaptai and took a left through forests and mountains for a few kilometers before arriving at the Navy area. There were only a few tin sheds and a field at the Kaptai Naval Base. It was a pretty sight. Jahed Latif told me that the Navy held many activities here. Training would be conducted here first, and then they would build an Academy with an Officers’ Mess. The ground below would need paving and a parade ground would be made. But now, there was no place to stay.

Jahed and I returned to the Chittagong Naval Base. Everything was calm. The news from Dhaka was good too. Sayem Shaheb was now the President. Apparently, justices could also be presidents, if it so pleased the military. Moshtaq had managed to survive. He had shifted to his old house in the old city but he was being guarded and couldn’t get out. Perhaps he would get out later. The murderers had left the country, so naturally, these men would too one day.

We toured the Chittagong Base office the next day. There was a GE and staff here too. At one point, we went to see the Commodore Commandant Sultan Shaheb. He was a small man but he was in a seat of power. Martial law had been imposed and the army was in power. Sultan Shaheb talked with me for a while and even had tea. Wherever we went, Jahed was introducing me as Major Shahid, the most celebrated officer of his core.

We returned to Dhaka from Chittagong. At the office, I met the Director, Works and Chief Engineer. A religious man, he didn’t speak much. Jahed then took me to the room next to the DWCE’s and the man who sat there stood up and, in a loud voice, hailed, “Joy Bangla!” My heart filled with joy and I felt as though this was the first time I heard that salute since coming to Dhaka this time. This was the actual slogan of the freedom fighters. I heard that, to the Pakistanis, especially those who would go to Pakistan from East Pakistan, two of the scariest words to them were “mukti” (freedom) and “Joy Bangla” (Victory to Bengal). Then, the word “Bangladesh.” Previously, it had been “Bangla” and “Bangali.” Now, the words “Sheikh Mujib” had been added. Then the six-point demand. They would write about “mukti” in the Pakistani papers, even though they referred to them as Hindu miscreants from India. The word “miscreants” gained great popularity in West Pakistan. It would even be used to address naughty children.

In Dhaka, Bardhan Shaheb was in control of the DWCE office. Jahed Latif introduced me to him and then we went to sit in the office. Jahed Latif said, “See, there wasn’t really a navy in Dhaka during the Pakistani regime, but there is the Haji Muhammad Mohsin Base in the Cantonment. And the land in Banani has been taken from the Army. The Naval Headquarters is now in the home of Monem Khan. That’s where the CNS (Chief of Naval Staff) sits now, along with others. There are two houses in Eskaton. The then-East Pakistani Chief lived in one of those houses and it is now known as the Nou Bhaban. It is now the CNS’s home. There is a small compound where the ADC lives. Some land is being acquired in Lalashuri but that area is currently a 25-30 foot deep hole. A lot of work needs to be done. All permissions, including the plan, have been approved. All we need is the budget to start work.”

After this, members of the GE Office and the CNO Office were called in to be introduced. One of them was Ahmed. He was E-6. Another was AQS, and there were several SDOs and supervisors. Then there was the small, round Haris, the accountant/cashier, the everything. We had several cups of tea and smoked some cigarettes. As the day drew to a close, Jahed quickly took me to the Haji Muhammad Mohsin Base. The Base Commander was a jolly fellow. We were introduced when Dr. Mamud came in, seemingly a very young man. He was in naval uniform while we were in army uniform.

On our way home, as I went to drop off Jahed, he suddenly told me that he would be gone from the next day. He had, at some point during the day, gone to see the CNS and the others. I would have to take care of the rest. He also told me that he wouldn't be able to go to Khulna with me and that I should go alone. There was one in-charge over there, Captain Mujib, from Dhaka; a good sportsman. He was a nice man, and I wouldn't be inconvenienced. In addition, there were some naval equipment in Khulna since the Pakistani regime.

I returned home after dropping Jahed off. The next day, when I ment Bardhan Shaheb, I learned that it was each man for himself regarding housing. If I rented a house, the Defence would pay for it, but there was a limit of nine or nine hundred and fifty taka. I would get rations from the army but the station commander would determine that. There was a doctor at the Base and I could avail the services at the CMH if needed. There were no other facilities other than these.

I quickly got an overview of the Navy. My name was already on the list, so when my turn came, I went to the Naval Headquarters. I went to the ADC's room, which was just beyond the CNS Shaheb's office, and introduced myself. I waited here until I was called. There are times when one is instantly delighted by someone on the first meeting. That is how I felt when I met the CNS. Even though he was Vice Admiral, everyone called him Admiral M H Khan. He was always smiling. In fact, the whole six feet of him seemed to be laughing all the time. He stretched out his long arm for a handshake and invited me to sit. Once the ADC left, we sat. He knew me by name. The first question that popped out of my mouth was whether he knew that I wasn't interested to continue my job. He replied that he had heard. Then he said, "That will happen, but first, construct the Naval Headquarter. How long will it take?"

I said, "Sir, I can't tell you that now. I need to see the plan first. Then I'll need a budget."

He said, "Everything's set. We just need to start work. You have to get your designs and drawing approved by the ministry and apply for the tender. You have to work to get the work done."

"Sir, may I get back to you in a couple of days?"

"Okay."

We were not speaking in Bangla. While I spoke in a mixture of Bangla and English, he talked entirely in English. Of course, neither of us had any trouble comprehending each other. He seemed to have a stutter, but the way he handled it made his words all the more convincing – and inspiring. He went on: "We'll make a building for the Naval Headquarter and a Ward Room (or what you people call the Officers' Mess). We'll also need many C, B, and D-type quarters as well as boundary walls, entrance, road, supplies of water, electricity, and gas, and furniture."

The list grew longer. He never said anything about the country, the army, or Pakistan. In a straight-forward manner, he said, "Did you know my wife, Fahmida, is from Shillong? She went to school in Loreto, Shillong, where you wife, Ameenah, and her sisters went. My father knew your father-in-law very well. In fact, at one time, my father used to be a tenant of your father-in-law. I've also met your father-in-law."

I understood the relevance of his words only later. Basically, his sincerity in talking about personal relations had put me at ease with him, and could be surmised as a tactic to make me work harder. He also said, "Brigadier Habib will be coming here as the DWCE. Do you know him?"

I replied, "Sir, he may not remember me, but I had seen him at Nowshera."

Finally, he said, "Shahid, if you have any problems, just let me know."

I shook hands with him and exited. I thought, first I fell into the hands of Manzoor, then Mannaf, and now, probably, M H Khan. From the ADC's office, I went into Nurul Islam's room.

I was thinking of leaving the ADC's office when, before me, I saw someone who, from the stripes on his shoulder, appeared to be a senior official. I went instantly into salute mode and he asked, "You must be our new GE, Major Shahid."

I said, "Sir, …!"

He said, "I am Mahbub Ali Khan."

We went into his office to sit, but we couldn't quite connect. Akbar Shaheb entered and then I went downstairs. I heard the name of the Navy's AAC, Fakruddin, and went to meet him. I liked him very much.

This was my primary introduction to the Naval Headquarters.

Two days later, I headed off for Khulna, stopping at Jessore on the way. This was the first time my parents saw me in uniform. Ma, of course, was ecstatic that her son had become a Major, but it was difficult to guage Abba's feelings. After a short visit, I continued on to Khulna. The roads, built in the time of Ayub Khan, were pretty empty. A well-established contractor in our Jessore area, Ahmed Ali Sardar, had built these roads and we would come to watch the progress. Like Ayub Khan, he had planted trees similar to the velvet apple alongside the road. Later, I learned that the trees were mahogany.

During the military rule, a strange thing happened. One or the other harmful tree was imported and planted. There was Ayub Khan and his mahogany; then there was the Eucalyptus in Ershad's time that was planted in large numbers. This affected the country's ecosystem, but no one was bothered by it.

I went directly to Captain Mujib's office when I arrived at the Khulna base. He welcomed me with such enthusiasm that it almost felt like a welcome party. He had tea and shingara[61] brought in. He was a tall, slim man. It was obvious from his body structure that he was a sportsman. I was amazed at how he was able to laugh and joke with so much ease with a man he had just met. Forget about English, or Urdu, or Punjabi, or Bangla – he spoke continuously in the language of old Dhaka, or Dhakaiyya. And the stories! He had no trouble switching from one story to the next. I noticed a spot on the wall prepared for the

[61] Triangles of pastry stuffed with a savory filling, usually potatoes, peas, and carrots. A popular snack in Bangladesh.

placement of a marble stone and, curious, I asked why it was like that. He said, “Oh, don’t ask! There was a tablet here with Bangabandhu on it. I’ve put it away for now and will put it up when it’s time.”

“Did you know Bangabandhu?”

“What a thing to ask! Of course I did. Do you remember some of the defence activities that were started in his time? I was in charge in Khulna at the time. There was no army here and it was very hard. There were arms and armed men in their element everywhere. We were tasked with capturing those men. So I called a meeting with everyone – the DC, SP, MP, the political leaders – I didn’t even leave out the police station or courthouse. I instructed everyone to capture the miscreants, seize their arms. I had to send a report to Dhaka.

One month went by but no one was apprehended. No arms were seized. So I gathered everyone together again. Everyone came. One by one, I asked them how many had been arrested and how many arms were seized. They all replied with the same answer: they had run away. So I said, ‘Ok then. Sit there nursing your …. Now, get out!’ Within an hour, I got a call, directly from Bangabandhu. ‘Caeser, have you gone mad? What did you say to all those people?’ After reprimanding me for some time, he said, ‘You need to control yourself when speaking to all these people. They’re all well-respected and educated.’”

I really liked this captain. With much effort, I took his leave and went to my office. After getting introduced to everyone, I expressed my desire to stay the night. A room had already been booked for me at the guest house of the People’s Jute Mill. Food was included for officers down to the supervisor level.

Amidst much laughter and fun, we ate. I told stories about how many times I had visited Khulna before, that my maternal grandmother was born in Bagerhat, my older brother had married in the Syed neighborhood. After our meal, we had a discussion about the MES and I informed them about the load of work coming up.

Early next morning, I went to Jessore, met with my family, and then flew to Dhaka. I went to take a look at the residence of the CNS and then sat with the plan for the Naval Headquarters. I mentally calculated that it was possible to complete the construction in a year. I went to the CNS’s office one day and informed him of this. He was happy and I thought to myself that I would be free after this.

I had rented a two-bedroom apartment in Dhanmondi. Nabil was attending school at Holy Cross. He went by rickshaw and I picked him up on the days I came home for lunch. Nabil’s Nana was delighted when I told him that I would stay in this apartment and pay a rent of 950 taka.

Kamal had rented an apartment in Shankar around this time. The rent was probably around 1500 taka. That was a lot of money. He began to bother me immensely. Every evening, he showed up at my house. He had just one request – he needed a job. And I must give him one. He had left his partner, Afsaruddin, in Chittagong and come to Dhaka hoping to work at his cousin’s office in Motijheel. He never told me that they had had a falling out. Their company was called “Bastushilpi.”

Kamal was a stubborn man. He was a carpet knight and expected me to hand him a kingdom. He came every evening and sat at my house till night. He managed to ruin two years’ worth of evening family time for me and my wife. We couldn’t invite anyone over because of him and neither could we go out to any party.

But if I had to give him work, it had to be in the name of Bastushilpi. Otherwise, we would need another company. More importantly, he needed to be enlisted with MES, which he wasn't. One had to have an A-category company to be enlisted. But Kamal would not be satisfied with just any job. I said, "I'll see." I went to see Bardhan Shaheb who was happy with me because I said, "Joy Bangla." After August 15, 1975, everyone had forgotten this phrase. I ended up telling Bardhan that he had to give my friend, Kamal, work even though he was not enlisted. I asked him to persuade the DWCE to help out.

Bardhan wasn't too happy about it. So I called Ahmed Shaheb. He also did some contracting work. Ahmed was smart. He said, "Sir, I'll need money. Tell your friend that his new company will cost him a little."

Sitting at our rented apartment at 13/4, Kamal asked me for a name for his new company. I replied, "Where would I get a name? It's your company, you name it." The following day, he came to report that he had selected the name, "Concord." Thus, Concord was born in my home. Its full name was Concord Construction Limited. A day later, he came around to say that the name was to be modified but it would still have Concord in it. I said, "Do whatever you want."

In the meantime, I asked Bardhan about all the regulations and conveyed them to Kamal. He sent in an application which also comprised some of his actual experience with Bastushilpi. He also wrote about a small job or two that Concord had done. Seeing the letterhead on which he wrote, I said, "This is a different pad."

He said, "This is from my other company, which is not limited."

I said, "But you asked me to give you a name."

Kamal replied, "I thought of this later, so I decided to go with it. It's now changed to Concord Engineering and Construction Limited."

I said, "You will come to submit this application yourself. You might need some extra cash. That's what Bardhan Shaheb told me."

When Kamal came to the Navy Headquarters the following day, I sent him to Bardhan's office. The DWCE was a religious man and, after some persuasion, the company got an A-class enlistment. Kamal was ecstatic. When I brought him the letter, he began to hug and kiss me. Then he said, "Now I want some work."

I said, "Sure."

I stayed at the Navy office from morning till evening. Brigadier Habib had arrived and work had begun in full swing. I can't express what a pleasure it was to work under Brigadier Habib's supervision. He was a jolly man and knew how to protect those who worked for him. I was supposed to work with an architect from the Navy Headquarter who would wear a scarf around his neck and swing his hips when walking (he was probably a find of Brigadier Habib's). Brigadier Habib did the planning, drawing, etc. and then it took some time for me to fix it. I said to him, "Sir, this is the same plan you had, but it now looks like this." He never said that the final drawing was not his. Instead, he said, "Yes, now it looks good." That is, his work was correct.

Brigadier Habib went to the CNS whom he had met previously. This time, he went with the drawing, but he was upset with me on his return.

“You should have told me about Kamal! The CNS asked questions that I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t tell him anything about the drawing.”

Two days later, I said to him, “Come, sir, I’ll go with you.”

He said, “No. You go alone. I understand the matter now – you’re the blue-eyed boy of the CNS.” He let out a laugh.

Many people were coming to him. God only knew what would happen. I had no idea who these people were, what they were doing. I took the plans (elevation, side view, etc.) for the Naval Headquarters to the CNS and explained each one to him. He looked at the floor by floor plan and examined the location of each object. He made some corrections and said that the rest was okay. Then he asked what I would do next. I said, “Sir, I need the design and the sizes for the rods, columns, and walls. I need to make estimates.” He said, “Okay then. You take care of that. If you have any issues, show me.”

The design was completed and the tender prepared with a lot of effort. It was the same type of work I had done in Lahore. I learned the work then and was implementing it now. All the tenders were collected at the office of the DWCE and the results announced. I called the E-6 and said, “What’s happening here? Can you please explain it to me?” He said, “Sir, these are all enlisted contractors. The work is being distributed among 5 or 6 of them.”

There was apparently nothing anyone could do about this decision. A boundary wall and a gate were added to the previous design. The gate needed to be grand. I had asked Brigadier Habib to give Kamal some work. So he assigned him to do the boundary wall and the gate. The wall on the other side of the gate was given to someone else. Kamal visited every evening. I gave him the tender form and he asked, “What is this! How much is this work worth?”

I said, “Twelve lakhs. You have to submit a quote within this amount.”

Kamal almost broke down. “Shahid, what will I do with this insignificant amount of work? How will I set up office and how will I do anything else? So many big jobs slipped by and you couldn’t get me any of those!”

What could I say to this? Regardless, he submitted the tender and got the job for Concord. And that ended his stint with Bastushilpi.

There was no consultant for the Ward Room or Officers’ Mess. A typical army plan had been cursorily made. It was a sixty-lakh taka project for now but it could cost up to a crore. It was going to be a two-story building with a canteen, dining hall, ward room, kitchen, and a guest room downstairs. The second floor would be used as officers’ quarters. When I told Kamal about this job, he was adamant that he should get the contract. So, again, I asked Brigadier Habib, but he would not be persuaded. He said, “Concord is a new company. How would they handle this huge job?”

He must have thought about it because he soon changed his mind. He said, “Since you are insisting, and he’s your classmate, an engineer, he has done some good work with Bastushilpi, he’s done some big jobs

with Engineers Limited – I could give him the job. But I must not be embarrassed. Please ask your friend to see me."

I said, "I will, sir."

I brought the drawings home and, as usual, Kamal was there. He had rented an office at his cousin, Ansar Shaheb's building in Motijheel. I handed him the papers and said, "Here. Take a look at the drawings."

Kamal's face lit up when he saw the tender form. I said, "You wanted work, so I got you some."

He hugged me and said, "We'll do this fifty-fifty. You get fifty percent of Concord and I get the other fifty."

He went on in this vein for some time. When I told Ameenah about this at night, she merely laughed. She said, "Retire first. Then you can think about it. You know my father is an engineer too. He was Chief Boiler Inspector. So I'm familiar with these kinds of offers."

Kamal went to see Brigadier Habib. I don't know what they talked about but Brigadier Habib seemed impressed. He said, "You've brought me a good man. He'll get the job done."

Kamal said, "I need to do some architectural work here."

I said, "Have someone do it and include his remuneration in the cost."

Kamal hired a good architect by the name of Khairul Anam who did most of the architectural work. The tender results were announced and Kamal got the job, but everything was on-process. The work would begin only after permission was obtained from the Ministry through the ENC and Naval Headquarter. I called everyone and informed them that no contractor would approach the ENC or the Defence Ministry. Only someone from the office would go as finances were involved.

Kamal showed his wife, Kusum, Ameenah, and me his Motijheel office one evening. Kamal insisted that I sit in the main chair but Ameenah finally said, "Kamal Bhai, let him leave his job first. Then you can sit him in that chair."

I went to Chittagong and Kaptai. A lot of construction was going on there, especially at the Kaptai Base. A parade ground and some more barracks were needed because lots of trainings would be conducted here. The Ward Room/Mess in Chittagong was almost complete but it hadn't been done well. It was merely a barrack with tin walls and a roof. It had no design, no beauty. I stayed in two rooms at the Chittagong MES Rest House on the top of a hill.

A lot of my work had begun in Khulna. Mujib had returned to Dhaka and was to be promoted. The only person I didn't see was the SDO-Electric. Perhaps he was avoiding me – I had told him to lose weight on the first day we met. Apparently, he was trying very hard to do so, eating only cucumbers all day. When I went to Khulna after a brief period and met the man, I could barely recognize him. The poor man had lost so much weight! Unfortunately, after I left the Navy, I heard that it was the cucumbers that had led to his death. Two of the saddest experiences of my life were the deaths of two individuals – one, Dr. Mustafa, who died from eating too much meat; and then the SDO-Electric, who died from eating cucumbers.

I was in Dhaka. I was working from seven in the morning to evening, sometimes till ten or eleven at night. There were so many sites and so much work! In the midst of all this, Dr. Mahmud at the Haji Muhammad Mohsin Base, suddenly told me one day that I was getting fat.

"I work from morning till night. How can I be getting fat?"

He said, "Sir, there are two reasons: one, you do a lot of work, but don't exercise; and two, you're overeating. You were required to do a lot of physical labor when you were at the BMA but not anymore. Let's get you checked."

Blood tests showed that I had diabetes, albeit in the early stages. Dr. Mahmud advised me to diet and stay away from sweets.

"Also, you must regularly go on a forty-minute run and do some freehand exercises. Then you won't have any issues," he said.

I was worried by his diagnosis. Sometime in my childhood, I had heard that a grandfather of mine had diabetes. Other than that, I couldn't remember hearing of anyone else who had the disease. So, my first reaction was denial, a refusal to acknowledge my illness. Then I forgot all about it. Regardless, though, every morning from five to six-thirty, I did a run and some freehand exercises.

The work at the Naval Headquarters was almost complete, except that on the swimming pool, which did not progress. A new engineer arrived – Engineer Lutfor. After explaining everything to him, I made him the In-Charge of the swimming pool. I called the contractor, Ali Akbar, and asked, "What's going on? Why isn't the work progressing?"

He replied, "Sir, I had no idea that this job was going to be so hard. And I'm incurring too much loss, so I can't continue."

I quickly informed Brigadier Habib who asked for a solution. I said, "We could give him some other side jobs that could make up for his loss."

So, to create an opportunity for the contractor, Brigadier Habib came up with a drawing of a driving stage, saying that he had seen it in a Chinese book.

I said, "Sir, I need measurements."

"What do you mean! All you need is this photo. Just make a scale from the photo and enlarge it. You can get it done."

What sort of engineering was this? When I shared the plan with other engineer friends, they laughed at me and said, "Since when did anyone build something from a photo?"

They could laugh and be done with it, but I had no alternative but to figure out what to do. First, I drew out the model on the ground and created a template with some nails. Eventually, I did it and Brigadier Habib, on inspection, commented, "See, I told you it could be done!"

There were a couple of days of heavy rain during the monsoon and the wall of the swimming pool began to move skywards. When I got the news late at night, I ran to see what had happened. We filled up all the empty cement bags with sand and threw them in to hold the wall down but to no avail. I called a friend

then and he said, “Set up two shallow tubewells on either side and pump the water in for twenty-four hours. Then pour in about six or seven more inches of concrete at the shallow end.”

Engineer Lutfor spent the whole night outside in the rain, sitting on a board. Finally, after much sweat and toil, we managed to save the pool.

We didn’t have enough land to build forty D-type quarters. If we did, we wouldn’t have a field. I decided that we would build a ten-story building with forty apartments in it. Kamal instantly wanted the job. Earlier, he had taken the job of filling in the holes and installing the electric lines, apparently for his brother-in-law. He had also taken the job at Lalasuri. Now he wanted this job too! He hounded me and finally, I gave in. Again, I went to Brigadier Habib. He said, “Get permission from the CNS first. And think about the fact that Dhaka doesn’t even have a five-story building and you’re going to build an eleven-story one? Besides, the army is upset with you.”

I asked, “Why me? You are the ones doing everything. And then there’s the CNS. Why are they upset with this poor GE?”

He just laughed at me.

I shared everything with Kamal. He brought in Rafiq from DDC, his classmate and a qualified architectural engineer. I explained everything to Rafiq and when he handed me a plan elevation, I went to the CNS with it. I had to persuade him a lot before he finally agreed. There was no drawing of this either in the ENC or elsewhere. So the work was handed to DDC’s Rafiq who promptly made about a hundred drawings.

Kamal got the job. One day, I noticed Rafiq at the site. I had seen him here several times previously too. I asked, “You’re not supposed to be supervising. Why are you here?”

He said, “I didn’t get my bill for one lakh ten thousand taka.”

He was a simple man and I had no trouble figuring out the situation. I brought him to my office and called in everyone concerned. After getting his signature on the required paperwork, I handed Rafiq Shaheb a check of one lakh ten thousand taka and told him to get in his car, leave, and never come back.

The Naval Headquarter was ready. Major Ikramullah was in charge of the furniture. In the meantime, architect Bashirul Haq had returned from the US. Ikramullah brought him in one day and said, “We have to help him get established.”

I said, “Sure.”

I spoke to Kamal and an office, with furniture, was set up for him on Satmasjid Road. I even had to pay for all this. Then I gave him the contract for the Officers’ Mess in Kaptai. Many people from Jessore also got jobs. One day, Mannan Bhai called and said, “My sister’s husband, Engineer Aftab, works with Shamsuddin and Associates. Please give him some work, if you can.” So I sent Aftab to Lalasuri. Then there were the retired army officers. After the incident of ’75, they started to approach us. Among them were Shafaat Jamil, Major Hafiz and Captain Taj.

The credit for the dome on the Naval Headquarters has to be given fully to Brigadier Habib. He had Contractor Mansur import the dome from Japan. If the Naval Headquarters ever needed to be built up to the fifth floor (as the foundation determined), the dome could be removed and replaced.

Now that the Naval Headquarters was complete, my desk job began. We needed plenty of rods for the eleven-story building and for Lalasuri, but there was a shortage. They weren't available in the market, and even if they were, we could get, at most, one or two tons and I needed hundreds of tons. So we gave Rahman Steel Mills an advance. This mill was government-run but they would take the money, manufacture the rods during the day and hide them somewhere in trucks. During the night, they would smuggle them out to the contractors. So we couldn't find any. I set up someone to watch and catch the culprits redhanded. Soon I got news about the smuggling. I immediately took a team of naval police and surrounded the mill. The GM was apprehended and we returned with him to the Chairman of the Steel Corporation. We told him that the man had been arrested and we could either turn him in to the police or he could take action. He said that he would take care of it

So we left the GM in the Chairman's custody. The next morning, I was summoned by the CNS. When I went to his office in the new Naval Headquarters building, I found someone else sitting there with him. The CNS introduced the man. "This is Secretary of the Industrial Ministry, Mr. Rabbani. He tells me that yesterday, you raided the Rahman Steel Mills and took the rods. Is this true?"

I said, "Yes, sir, it's true. But there's something more." Then I narrated the whole incident. The CNS turned to the Secretary and said, "What would you say to that then?"

He replied, "Looks like he did the right thing."

Without any further discussion, I left the room.

I began playing squash and tennis in the newly constructed courts. Commodore Mujib also played and brought General Matin ENC from the army with him.The Second-to-Chief of Naval Staff, Mahbub Ali Khan also came – although he played tennis as if it were badminton. One day, purposely making sure I could hear, he said to someone: "Everyone in the army is a thief."

I couldn't stand it. I stormed towards him with my racquet. Mujib didn't stop me either. When he saw me coming, Mahbub Ali Khan began to run. He ran, and I ran behind him. When we got to the end of the field, he stopped and, panting, he said, "Shahid, my heart will give out!"

I stopped. Returning to the court, I found Mujib rolling over in laughter.

The next morning, I was summoned to the Naval Headquarters to find DWCE Commander Mujib, Mahbub Ali Khan and the CNS, all looking rather grave. I entered and saluted. The CNS asked me directly, "Shahid, were you playing tennis yesterday?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Did you run after Mahbub Ali Khan with your racquet with the intention of hitting him?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I know why?"

"Sir, he called everyone in the army a thief."

Hearing this, the CNS turned to Mahbub Shaheb and said, "You can't speak like this, Mahbub."

Looking guilty, Mahbub Shaheb looked first at the CNS, then at me. Then he said, “Shahid, what are you saying? I hadn’t finished speaking. You only heard that and started chasing me. I actually wanted to say that NOT everyone in the army is a thief.”

I looked at him, stunned, but I didn’t say another word. The CNS said, “Shahid, you can go.”

I went to sit in the ADC’s room, and then, a little later, I was called back in.

The CNS said, “Shahid, what you did was wrong. You will need to ask Mahbub to forgive you. Do you agree?”

I replied, “Okay, sir.”

“You can go now.”

I went outside and waited. After quite a while, Mahbub Ali Khan emerged and said, “Come.”

I followed him. We entered his office and he turned to me, “Shahid, do you think it’s okay to act like this amongst ourselves?”

“Sir, I’m very sorry about yesterday’s incident. I’m asking you to forgive me.”

He embraced me and said, “Is that even necessary anymore? Am I not your brother? Come, sit with me and have lunch.”

I said, “Thank you, sir, but I have work to attend to. I’ll be on my way,” saying which, I came downstairs.

I went to Mujib’s office. He was very amused. He stopped laughing quite a while after I had sat down. I said, “Sir, why are you laughing so much?”

“Because, as soon as you left the room, the CNS said, ‘Mahbub, you’ve developed a habit of lying.’ Mahbub tried to say something, but the CNS interrupted, ‘Juniors don’t usually file complaints about their seniors. You will have no more to say about the matter. But I will ask Shahid to ask you to forgive him. Do you agree?’ Mahbub Shaheb replied, ‘Sir, whatever you say. But I want to say one thing – Shahid is extremely insolent.’ The CNS stopped him, ‘You’re on again?’ Then Mahbub Shaheb said, ‘Sir, he walks in and tosses his cap on your desk. Then he leans on his left hand and sits sideways. And look at me. You’re my senior and when I come in to your office, my knees knock against each other. See, they’re shaking right now.’ The CNS became angry. ‘Mahbub, if you enjoy doing this, carry on. And if Shahid enjoys what he does, let him – because he does his job well. If you all did your duty like he does, you too could sit at my desk like him. Now leave.’”

This is what had Mujib crack up.

The inauguration of the Naval Headquarters was coming up. There was a frenzy of tree-planting. I planted the trees with my own hands all the way from Banani Road to the Naval Headquarters. I also planted some inside.

General Zia attended the inauguration. We all stood at attention as he alighted from his car. He never shook hands fully, merely touching the tips of his fingers to the outstretched hands. He entered and inspected the stairs, the dome above, and the chandelier. He examined the brass and wood work – all

through his dark glasses. Then he was escorted to the conference room upstairs. The CNS explained in detail all the work that had been done at the Naval Headquarters as well as the future plans. Finally General Zia was requested to say something. But the general didn't. He refused the refreshments and told the CNS that he wanted to sit in his office. So the two of them left for the office. A few minutes later, General Zia strutted out of the office, got in his car and left.

When the CNS came back to sit upstairs, we said, "Sir, we'd arranged for some snacks." But the CNS only had tea with us. As he left, he told me to meet him before I left. We dove into the tea and snacks now. I had woken up before dawn and it was now almost noon. Still, there was a sense of celebration in the air. We were overjoyed that we had completed such a huge job so well. Mahbub Ali Khan and Akbar Shaheb were being congratulated for the work, and they began to accept the praise with pride.

I went out of there to the CNS's office. "Sit!" he said, rather forcefully. So I did. He said, "General Zia isn't happy. Is it right to spend so much money and build such fancy things in a poor country like ours?"

All I said was, "Sir, the difference between the army headquarters and ours is a mere 20 taka per square foot. If that's the reason for the objection, they'll say this today. Twenty-five years later, the same people will point fingers and ask why this is so small, why such old technology has been used, was it really necessary to use local bulbs and chandeliers made by Crescent?"

The CNS said, "Okay, you go ahead."

I left. Crescent had taken an advance to buy machinery. They had done some of the work and were still doing so. Khalil Shaheb was himself a good man and he had support from Nitun Kundu.

We had left the apartment in Dhanmondi and moved to Banani. It was a one-storied house, rather small. There were dual bedrooms, a living and dining room, a verandah, with a lawn in front and behind. It belonged to Justice Khaleq and the rent was 1500 taka. The office paid our rent because I was now a Lieutenant Colonel.

I planted a bottle gourd plant in the corner of the house. My mother used to grow beautiful gourds. One Sunday, when Boro Bhai came to Jessore to visit, Ma made sautéed gourd, mixed vegetables with gourd, gourd with fish, gourd halwa, gourd pudding, etc. How delicious! When Boro Bhai left for Khulna the next morning, Ma packed around ten gourds in his trunk without telling him. Along the way, Boro Bhai was distracted by the sound of something rolling around in the trunk. He told the driver to stop the car and told Akkas (his peon) to open the trunk. My brother's tiny eyes grew as big as tennis balls when he saw what was in there. He yelled at Akkas to pick up the gourds and toss them out onto the road.

My gourd plant flourished and spread across the rooftop and the verandah. Then it traversed our ten katha of land and beyond. My friends were always apprehensive that I had brought them the leaves to eat like spinach. But there was no sign of any fruit. I brought Ma over and chopped off two-thirds of the plant, as she advised. I poured the water left over from washing fish and rice at its roots. And one day, I spied a baby gourd. Happiness flooded the entire house. I covered the bud with a piece of cloth so that bugs wouldn't get to it. But there were no more gourds after this. That one gourd grew to six feet before we cut it. I invited my friends and cooked all the dishes that Ma had made myself. Later, when I calculated, I found that I had spent 1700 taka on that one gourd. But the gourd was not spared. Plus, we did get one or

two gourds a month. But I never again planted nor asked for a gourd plant again. Still, gourds remain one of my favorite vegetables.

There were no markets in Banani, except for a shanty selling bread. Most of the shops in Gulshan-1 and 2 were closed. Only one or two shops were operational. We had to shop for goods in New Market. As it was getting difficult to do anything, I bought a Fiat for Ameenah and the children.

Around this time, one day, Boro Bhai called to say that Abba's health was deteriorating. "Can you go to Jessore and bring Abba? I wanted to take him to a doctor in Dhaka."

I took leave that very day and flew to Jessore. Boro Bhai had called ahead. I flew back the same evening with Abba and Ma. Ameenah drove the Fiat and took us to the General Hospital. Abba was thrilled – his son's wife could drive! At the hospital, Dr. Colonel Ali looked at Abba and declared, "Obstruction." I took Abba from the hospital to Boro Bhai's.

But Abba showed no improvement. So, I persuaded Dr. AR Khan to pay a visit to Abba at home. He did. Mejho Bhai brought a doctor, Dr. Ashraf. We also went through other treatments but to no avail. His stomach ached constantly and he lost so much weight that he looked like a skeleton. Finally, we took him to CMH. Colonel Nawab Ali had already been notified. With great attention, he pressed down on different points on Abba's stomach and then he also examined Abba's back for a while. Then he said, "Come with me."

I went with him to his office. With some hesitation, he said, "Shahid, your father has cancer. Innumerable tumors are obstructing passages in his stomach. He's in the advanced stage. There is unfortunately no cure for this and his time is nearly up."

I was shocked. "Sir, we saw so many doctors but nobody said a thing."

He replied, "He's in the advanced stage. It could be any day. Prepare yourselves."

There was nothing else we could do. Dr. Ali did not give any medication but, just to satisfy Abba, I requested him to give a prescription for an antacid. But when Abba died, we discovered many books, leaflets and documents on cancer in his suitcase.

I came out of the doctor's office and went to pick up Abba's emaciated body from the bed. Childhood memories flooded back – just like this, Abba had once carried me in his arms and laid me down in bed when I was ill. I was three or four then. Abba's eyes were closed and his body relaxed. Tears filled my eyes because, at that moment, I knew my beloved father was almost dead and in my arms.

I laid Abba down in the back seat of the car and drove to Boro Bhai's home at Road No. 96, Gulshan. I picked Abba up and went upstairs to lay him down in the bed. It was obvious that he was in pain. The day was a Friday.

I went back to Boro Bhai's house in the evening and called Ameenah aside to tell her that Abba's was declining. Her usual happy face turned ashen. After giving it a thought, she said, "Tell Boro Bhai." I called Boro Bhai and told him. He was stunned. After a while, he said, "There's no need to tell anyone else."

But Boro Bhai himself called everyone. Most came: Chapabu, Henu, Kamal, Monwar Bhai. Abba had been unable to speak for quite a few days because it was causing him pain. Monwar Bhai read out one or

two essays to Abba from Abba's collection, "Parting Words to Posterity" and it triggered Abba to speech. One by one, all my siblings arrived. I went every morning and evening. So did Ameenah and the kids. The kids, of course, benefitted doubly – they could see their grandfather as well as play.

It was September 2, 1977, also a Friday. I received news that Abba was suffering greatly. Instantly, I went to the CMH, grabbed hold of Dr. Siraj Jinaat, and went to Abba. He inserted a catheter to help with excretion. Abba suddenly opened his eyes and said to Dr. Jinaat, "You are a very handsome man and a good doctor. The world is beautiful."

Jinaat Shaheb replied, "Sir, you are a good man."

Abba appeared to close his eyes in peace on hearing this.

I had just sat in my office after dropping off Jinaat Shaheb at the CMH when I received a phone call. Boro Bhai said, "Abba left us a few minutes ago."

I drove myself to Banani and stopped in front of my house. I had called Ameenah from the office and asked her to wait downstairs. She came out with a few pears in her hands. Apparently, Abba had said one day that he loved pears. He used to eat this fruit when he was a student at Ripon College in Calcutta. I got out of the car and told Ameenah that Abba was gone. She was speechless. The pears slipped and fell from her hands one by one. She was oblivious.

The next morning, I took Abba's coffin to the airport hanger. On the coffin was written, "The human remains of Kazi Anisur Rahman." The coffin was loaded on to the plane, and we boarded. Abba was buried in Karbala, Jessore. Boro Bhai returned to the house to take care of the files of Abba's writing, as well as the letters he had written and received.

We flew back to Dhaka on the next morning's flight.

In Dhaka, on my way to meet Commodore Mujib at the Naval Headquarter, I found the CNS blocking my way. He grabbed my hand and conveyed his condolences. Mujib did the same.

My work resumed. Pressure was extremely high. Although I was working hard, the thought of leaving the army resurfaced. But Commodore Mujib told me that I had to go to England to inspect the swimming pool filtration system. He was sending me to get a two-week training so I could learn how to use it.

I didn't see the need to refuse. Commodore Mujib took it on himself to confirm the arrangements for me. The filtration plant manufacturers in London had been contacted and they would pick me up from the airport. Everything was set. I learned that I would be receiving a ticket for business class, but I really wanted to take Ameenah with me. Shaking off my hesitation, I said to Commodore Mujib, "Sir, can't we change the business class ticket to two economy class ones? Then I would take Ameenah with me."

Mujib said, "Okay, I can arrange that. Take this letter now and get your GO permission from the Defence Ministry."

I took leave – fifteen days for duty and fifteen days of leave. But permission from the Ministry didn't come. I went there only to discover how complicated things were. Irritated, I said, "Listen, you see this stick in my hand? Well, if I don't get the letter by tomorrow, I will show you what a beating means. And all your pomposity about being DS and Senior Section Officer will be dust!"

I left and went back the next day. The Section Officer handed me a crumpled piece of paper with a signature on it. I said, “Why does it look like this?” He said, “Everyone was grabbing it to be the first to sign. That’s why it looks like this.”

“What rubbish!” I said. I placed the letter on the table, straightened and then folded it, put it in my pocket, thanked them and left.

I had just sat down in my office when Colonel Malek appeared. It had been so long! He hugged me on entering and even planted a kiss on my head!

On November 7, this man had called me and said, “Shahid, save me.”

Astonished, I asked, “Why? What happened to you?”

The instant reply was, “I was with Khaled and Shafaat, but I ran way and saved myself. I’m standing in front of the jail right now. Send my friend, Colonel Mahbub. Let him take me and put me in jail.”

I said, “Since you’re in front of the jail, why don’t you just check yourself in?”

He said, “Shahid, it’s not a joke. The situation is serious. I’ll die otherwise. Just tell me if you can do it.”

I asked, “Sir, where are you calling from now?”

He said, “I can’t tell you.”

“Then, please, call me back again after a while. Let me speak to Mahbub in the meantime.”

I called Mahbub and told him to go to the prison to rescue Colonel Malek. And I told Colonel Malek not to worry as Mahbub was on his way. “Just identify yourself and he will do the rest.”

Later, Mahbub told me that when he got to the jail gate, there was no one in sight. Suddenly, after a while, he saw a man approaching – with dirty hair and beard, cap on his head, dressed in a gown (alkhalla) and pyjamas. He said, “I’m Colonel Malek.” And Mahbub took care of the rest.

The same Colonel Malek had come back after so many years to thank me. But I was sure he was here for some other reason but I didn’t say anything. Instead, I invited him to sit and treated him to tea and shingara. We chatted about many things until he finally came to his main reason for being there. He was a civilian now and so he wanted to build a Thai aluminum factory in his hometown. He had got in touch with a Mr. Surasik from whom Kamal also got his supply and if we used aluminum in the Navy and gave him a letter to that effect, it would be easy for him to get permission for the industry. Mr. Surasik would be reassured about the stability of the business. I said, “Come and take it tomorrow.”

Colonel Malek came the next day and collected his letter, but that was the last I saw of him. After I left the Army, I met him once in Bangkok, along with Mr. Surasik. Both were involved in nefarious activities, so they both ignored me. My friend Kamal was a good friend of theirs too.

Another person, just like this, came to see me. He was my big brother. About a couple of months after November 7, he suddenly appeared at our Dhanmondi residence. He had driven himself over and called me to go outside with him. Pointing at the car, he said, “Look inside.”

I peeped in to see a man lying on the backseat, wrapped up in a blanket. I exclaimed, “What is going on? Who’s that?”

Boro Bhai said, “KQ Huda. His brother, Huda, died with Khaled. He’s been hiding out in my house for the last couple of months. You have to request the army to throw him in jail; otherwise, he’ll be killed.”

I said, “Boro Bhai, keep him where he was. Let me see what I can do.”

The best that I could do was to tell Mohsin or Mahbub. They picked him up from Boro Bhai’s house and he survived that episode. Later, though, he died in a plane crash. He was a wonderful person and could help people. Colonel Nazmul Huda, too, was a good person. It was he who died on November 7, 1975, along with Brigadier Khaled Musharrof.

Chapter Twenty-six

Re-Establishment of the Abahani Club

During the time I lived in Dhanmondi, I used to see how sorry the state of the Abahani Club was. After August 15, ’75, it looked as though no one had been assigned to take care of the Club. Thinking of the youths of the community, Sheikh Kamal had established this Club to improve the state of sports in Bangladesh. He had given a lot of his time and labor to establish this Club. After his tragic death, the Club became the site of politics and was abandoned. I had always been a love of sports and I knew how valuable a good Sports Club was to young athletes. So I felt hurt at the condition of an established Club like the Abahani.

I used to work in my Banani office at the time. One day, the son of contractor Shamsuddin Shaheb, Momenuddin Ahmed, and the General Secretary of the Abahani Club, Harun, came to see me. They both requested me to be part of the Abahani Club. Abahani was a Dhanmondi Club and I was a son-in-law of Dhanmondi. Therefore, I had some duty with the Clubs. These were their words as they tried to persuade me. I did not promise anything on the first day and told them I’d think about it. But they wouldn’t give up and began visiting me regularly. Finally, I went to the Abahani Club as they requested. The Club was basically just a room, and that too without a roof. Harun had barely managed to keep the Club standing. Dr. Musa was also completely dedicated to the Club. After my inspection, I decided that I would help to bring back life to the Abahani Club. The first thing we needed, however, was money. So, I made a rule that each of the contractors who worked with me would have to donate a portion of their bill, once received, to Abahani. Unfortunately, that didn’t really bring in enough funds. We could construct a roof over the room but there were other costs, which kept rising.

The Club’s president was Sohel Rahman, but later, Mansur Shaheb was given the job. Mansur Shaheb donated much to the Club. So did others like Saluddin’s father, Shafiq Shaheb, the jute businessman, Baker Shaheb, Anwar Hossain Manju, Sohel. But we needed even more money, so we decided to hold a charity show. Harun persuaded the singer, Runa Laila, to do a stage show for Abahani. The ticket would cost 500 taka and I managed to sell a lot of tickets as the host. The program was held at an expensive hotel and we were able to raise two or three lakhs from there. That was a lot of money and we all felt reassured.

I became deeply involved with the Club in different ways. I was there for the trainings, for the briefings on game days. I also went to the field with Nabil and Anis. They would carry a ball. If we lost, we would get beaten up or chased; if we won, I was thrust aside because the supporters would push forward to lift the players on to their shoulders in glee. Gradually, I learned how to escape if we lost and where to stand if we won. It was important to learn these tactics, otherwise I’d be chased or beaten up always. The two rival teams were the Abahani and the Mohammedans, and a game between them was likely to become a battlefield, a madness. The entire country would become divided into two camps, going crazy, putting up their respective flags, whenever a game was scheduled. On the day of the game, everything was shut down from two in the afternoon, the destination for young and old – the stadium. They competed with each other to get there first. Some carried tiffin carriers of food and entered the stadium in the morning, and a fight was inevitable after the game. The supporters of both teams would fight until at least ten in the night while the players of the teams would be sitting together at a hotel and eating soup and having fun.

Chapter Twenty-seven

My First Trip Abroad

One day, I set off for England. This was my first trip abroad. It was November 7, 1977. Before leaving, I received a lot of tips and advice from everyone. Captain Nurul Haque had given me his overcoat and scarves. England was their second home. Many others helped in different ways.

As soon as I emerged from Heathrow Airport, a gentleman named Mike came forward to shake my hand. He had come to pick me up. We loaded my luggage into the car and Mike got in the driving seat while I sat in the passenger seat. I couldn't figure out whether he was a chauffeur and I didn't want to ask. Once we started off though, Mike himself told me that he was the Managing Director of Start Oil Company. I heaved a silent sigh of relief – good thing I hadn't asked whether he was the driver! Mike took us to a nearby hotel called Ariel where we'd stay. He also told us that his factory was close by. We liked the place because we had not really seen a good hotel except Shahbagh.

The next morning, an engineer came to meet us. He was called Mike too, and he was accompanied by Michael. We went over several maps and drawings together. Then I was given a tour of the factory. For three or four days, I went over the swimming pool filtration system. It didn't seem difficult and I quickly got a grasp of it. In addition, someone would go over from here when the system was installed. So, my training or official work was completed within five or six days. With my fifteen days of leave and the extra seven or eight days I got, I now had about 22 days on hand. Staying in London for so many days didn't make sense, so we decided to take a tour of Europe. But I only had a total of five hundred pounds in my pocket. Regardless, we got on the Cosmos bus one day – apparently the last bus of the season, because the buses didn't ply during the winter. Just one driver, driving a huge bus across different countries of Europe, accompanied only by a female guide – they took meticulous care of booking the hotel rooms and food of the seventy passengers on board. The luggage of the seventy passengers were loaded and unloaded by just these two people. They also took us to see the tourist spots. We saw the European Union building in Belgium, the Danube River in Germany, the mountains and lakes of Switzerland, the castles in Venice, opera halls where all the famous dancers performed, and so on.

We reached Italy, feasting our eyes on the attractions. Our travels in Italy ended with viewing the the marble statues and there is no end to the sights in Paris. We got one free evening there; that is, we could do what we wanted. The hotel recommended we go to Ledo and gave us tickets. So, we went there. The main attractions in Ledo were dancing, food, and wine. There were striptease, that is, naked dances. The French knew of so many ways to have fun, almost as if they kept trying to think of new ways to enjoy themselves.

We needed to cross the channel again. When we got on the ferry, I put my hand in my pocket to find it empty. Ameenah and I bought one coffee and shared it between us. It was a good thing we had bought our return tickets beforehand. At the station, we got on the Tube and came to Hounslow. Then it was up to us to carry our luggage and walk all the way to the hotel. The Heathrow Tube wasn't in service yet and the walk was long. Still, the two of us only laughed because as the light fell on us, our clothes sparkled. We took turns looking at each other in the light, and soon we reached the hotel. No one we knew could see our childish behavior, so we felt free to do whatever we wanted.

When we called Dhaka the next day, we received some bad news. Ameenah's father, ARM Enamul Huq had passed away on November 11, 1977 at the PG Hospital. My mother-in-law, a strong woman, said, "This is the first time you've both gone abroad. There is no need to come back even one day early. There's nothing more you can do here."

I thought that when there was something to do, he was here and had done it. He had taken care of my son, Anis, like a father. He had protected us. He had been a good husband, a responsible man. He had met so many people, but today, he was gone. He was the first Bangali who donated his eyes and he had done so many other humanitarian work. I loved ARM Enamul Huq. God bless his soul.

According to my mother-in-law's directive, we stayed on and Ameenah was sad for a day.

Ameenah's younger sister, Taheerah, passed her Intermediate exam with flying colors in 1971 and went to America for higher studies. After completing her studies, she did not return. Instead, she stayed behind and got a job. She was doing well, but there was one thing she couldn't manage, even up till today – get married. As her older sister, Ameenah worried about her. In London, she found a Bangali doctor bachelor through Captain Nurul Haque's wife, Hosna. She asked Taheerah to come to London and meet the man. Taheerah agreed and came to London. As soon as she arrived, she asked if what she was wearing was okay. I said, "Yes."

The doctor gentleman arrived and we sat to chat in the sitting area in the lobby of the hotel. He was a handsome young man and I heard that he had a good reputation professionally. A little later, Taheerah came downstairs and the Bangali doctor seemed to be slightly taken aback on seeing her. How was I to know that Taheerah would come to meet this prospective Bangali groom in her western outfit – and that too with a cigarette on her lips!

The wedding did not, obviously, take place.

We took a tour of London where Ameenah had a lot of friends. Invitations to their homes went on one after another. In the meantime, my pockets had become empty. So, I had to pay a visit to an address that Kamal had given me. Kamal had called ahead, so without any trouble, I was able to borrow two hundred pounds. The London Tube is quite cheap and comfortable to travel in. Everyone explained how to use the Tube to get to my destination, but I couldn't quite understand it. There were signs everywhere but I still went once to the left, once to the right. And meanwhile, the train would arrive and depart. Eventually, I got on a train. The man sitting opposite me seemed to be a Pakistani, so I gathered up the courage to ask, "Brother, is this train going to so-and-so place?" He flared up at this ordinary question and said in Punjabi, "What's wrong with you? You have a map in your hand and the train has the sign as well. Why are you still asking?"

As soon as the train stopped, he got up and said, "I'm not going any further." Then, making a face at me, he got off the train, calling me "Mad."

I had a similar problem another day. I couldn't figure out which train to take. Ameenah said, "Let's go and ask those people over there standing in the light."

So we approached them, and addressing them in English, I said, "Brother, is the incoming train going to the right or the left?"

The man looked ready to topple over. He said, “Don’t you know this one goes one way and the other one goes the other way? How will one train go both ways?”

I asked, “Are you sure?” and returned after being yelled at.

Another day, we were returning from an invitation in a distant location. We came to the station and waited for a train that didn’t appear. Night was falling, so I went to what I thought was a guard to ask, “Where’s the train?”

He said, “You see that red light over there? Well, when you see it turn green, you’ll know the train is approaching.”

I don’t know what message we got from that, but the two of us started walking – intending to get to the green light. Our actions instantly created an uproar in the entire station, and we were literally dragged back and scolded, “Are you mad? This underground line has 1100 volts of electricity passing through it. You’d turn into ashes!”

We said, “Didn’t you just tell us the train would arrive over there?”

The guard said, “It will. But do you think it will stop over there? It will come here, where you’re standing.” He kept a hold of my hand and let go only after safely depositing us on the train.

I’m sure this happens in many cases but no one ever tells the story when they return home.

Towards the end of our stay in London, I ran out of money again. But we had to go to the theater before we left. I had asked for a loan of five hundred pounds earlier, but got only two hundred. Now I needed two hundred more. Someone told me that there was a restaurant selling Bangladeshi food at the Crystal Palace. It was owned by a Sylheti, a good and helpful man. So we went to the Crystal Palace and I introduced myself. Handing him my card, I said, “I’m a colonel. Will you lend me two hundred pounds?”

Immediately, he said, “No problem. But first, why don’t you have some lunch? Then we’ll talk.”

He gave us some first-rate food, food that he ate with his family, not the one he sold at the restaurant.

After lunch, he gave us the two hundred pounds and I left him my address. The road back from the Crystal Palace sloped downwards and the two of us almost danced down it. This man came to see me many years later in my office at our Dhanmondi residence. It was already dark but when he sat before me, I recognized him. I said, “Brother! Why haven’t you come before? I thought you had forgotten me or lost my address.”

He said, “I had your address. I’d even come to Bangladesh for a visit before now but I couldn’t meet you then. I had some time now, so I came to see you.”

He was a little taken aback at seeing me and asked, “Is this your house?”

I said, “No.”

“Then, does it belong to Bhabi’s family?”

I replied, “Yes, it’s theirs.”

Perhaps he was wondering why someone living in a house like this would borrow two hundred pounds, but he didn't utter the words. Instead, in his Sylheti dialect, he asked, "The pond I saw on the way in, does that belong to Bhabi's family as well?"

I explained, "No. That's not a pond. It's a lake and belongs to the government."

We chatted on for a while longer. Then, after serving him some tea and snacks, I took out the equivalent of two hundred pounds from my desk drawer and handed it to him. He refused to accept the money, but finally, I had to force him to take it.

Anyway, to come back to the story, we took the two hundred pounds and caught a show at the theater. We also visited more of Ameenah's friends and did all the other things we hadn't been able to yet – things that I cannot write about here.

Then, as scheduled, we boarded a plane. Boro Bhai and Ehsan came to receive us at Tejgaon Airport. We returned with Ehsan to Dhanmondi to find a still grieving house.

The thought of leaving my current job resurfaced vehemently once I returned from London.I sent a letter to the army stating that I should be given two years of seniority, otherwise, it would not be possible for me to continue working here because those who used to be my juniors were now my seniors. They had gone directly to the PMA while I had to complete my engineering degree before entering the army. So I had fallen two or two and half years behind them.

I didn't realize that my letter would create such a chaos. General Shawkat and several others formed a board to probe the issue. Brigadier Habib was asked what would happen if those who came to the Core of Engineers were given two years of seniority. Apparently, Brigadier Habib had said, "There will be disorder in the army. And it could spread from the Bangladesh Army to the Indian Army. In fact, it might even affect Russia. I've even heard that General Shawkat thinks it might even lead to the third world war."

I did not get my two years of seniority. However, the system was later established and still exists.

So, regardless of whether it caused a world war or not, I had to leave the army.

After returning from London and on my way to Khulna, I stopped in Jessore to see Ma. She had developed a stony attitude. My father used to sit outside with a bowl of rice so that my mother's afternoon nap was not disturbed by beggars asking for alms. Amma was spending her days now without that man. Ma said to me, "Until he actually passed away, I didn't ever think that he would go before me. He never told me that it was his time to go. He left me without any warning."

I said, "Would you have gone with him if he had told you?"

This was probably the first time Ma laughed since Abba's death. Ma and I had always had a deep connection, but I knew she relied first on my younger sister Rekha and her husband, Rahman, and then on Boro Bhai. Ma informed me that she would not leave her Jessore home and go anywhere else.

I replied, "As you wish."

She said, "If you can, do send some money."

And, until her last breath, Mintu and I continued to send her money.

The Navy's swimming pool filtration system had arrived, along with an engineer. It took a whole month to install the system and get it started. The British engineer warned us, "Don't empty the pool during the rainy season. Once the rains are over, empty the pool and clean it. Then, have it cleaned once more at the end of winter. Don't worry – it's a very good filtration plant."

I only got to know much later that Brigadier Rouf had been involved in the entire filtration plant process. He was the manufacturer's local agent.

Once the gallery of the swimming pool was complete, we arranged a festive opening with flags, festoons, and balloons. The CNS himself took care of it. I was praised greatly, but I believe that all praise is due to Allah.

The Officers' Mess, too, had been inaugurated with great pomp. The CNS was happy. He complimented both Brigadier Habib and me. He had said, "Your names will be written here and you will be lifetime members of the NHQ for all your contributions."

I had been delighted at his words but, in reality, nothing happened. I was never invited for even a cup of tea at the Naval Headquarters nor to any party at the Ward Room. I never again went to the Naval Headquarters or to the Ward Room again. Who knows when we will change and broaden our mindset? The same attitude is given towards everyone, but there is nothing anyone can do about it. Those who can do anything are so engrossed in improving their own careers that they lose sight of everything else.

Brigadier Habib was posted elsewhere and Colonel Sikander came to replace him. I knew him from Risalpur but within a few days, I realized that I couldn't work with him. He was very finicky, even though he understood designs well.

After going through some books, I wrote a letter to the new DWCE asking to be posted elsewhere. In the letter, I directly wrote that I did not want to work under him anymore. A junior officer is allowed to write this to a senior officer.

Colonel Sikander was at first astonished to receive this letter. Then, after mulling it over, he said, "Okay, Shahid. I'll see to it. I will forward your letter."

I replied, "Sir, thank you very much."

I began to prepare the J form again the very next day. I sent in my resignation once more. He said, "Do you know what will happen to this? These are dangerous times."

I said, "I've had enough. Please let me go."

He said, "I have no authority. All I can do is forward this."

"Then, please, do that."

He wanted to know where he should send the letter and I said, "It will go first to the ENC, then to the Army Headquarters."

I told him to forward the letter to the CNS now and I would carry it to the ENC, and later, to the Army Headquarters, myself. He said, “Do whatever you think is right.”

The DWCE kept his promise and I took my resignation letter to the ENC. I then went to General Matin and persuaded him to sign his recommendation, after which I sent it to the CGS at the Army Headquarters. I also made sure to clearly state my demands.

Since we moved to Banani, Kamal had stopped coming to visit. He knew which way the wind blew. He had already managed to find his way from the Navy into the Army and the Air Force. He had also taken on the contract for the Steel Engineering Corporation building. Then he would get the BSB and the Janata Tower contracts – a very resourceful man. Kamal did not meet me anymore, nor did he bother to call.

Chapter Twenty-eight

At the Army Engineering Battalion

My resignation was not accepted. Instead, I received a new posting – at 8 Engineering Battalion, Rangpur. A few days later, this order was cancelled and I was reposted to 3 Engineering Battalion, Mirpur, which was the lesser of two evils. In the meantime, we had left the house in Banani and moved to a house on Road 32, Dhanmondi. There were two rooms on the second floor, a tiny dining room, with a living room and a veranda. Altogther, it was about 1100 square foot of space with a rent of two thousand taka.

I found out that the 3 Engineering Battalion was going to Rangpur and 8 Engineering Battalion was coming to Mirpur. That meant Colonel Kader was coming to Mirpur with his battalion and I was going to Rangpur. I got to know this from Mannan Bhai and also that it had been orchestrated by Ershad Shaheb. Colonel Mujib took over as the CMES. There was no garrison engineer, so I handed over responsibility to Lutfor and left.

I already knew that the 3 Engineering Battalion was a daring lot. It was involved in the coup of 1977. The officers had committed several acts of violence including abducting employees of the TV station and killing them in the swimming pool and looting the Mirpur police station. In short, there was no discipline among them. I reported to the GOC of the battalion, General Shamsuzzaman. I knew him from Lahore and we were on good terms. He was happy to see me but, he said, I wouldn't be working with him as Colonel Kader would be replacing him.

Once I arrived at the battalion, Subedar Major Mannan and his 2IC, Faizur, came to meet me. We sat together and I noticed that the room had a table, chairs, carpet, curtains and other things that were not supposed to be in the Commanding Officer's room. I liked the 2IC, however.

I did nothing for three days. I woke up at five in the morning and arrived at the battalion by six. But no one here did PT or drills. They had all grown out of hand. There was no CO. A few classes were held, but after lunch, they all took a nap. Some went to the theater to watch movies, others went strolling. They apparently had a lot to do outside of the battalion. Even the officers had no clue about what they were supposed to do. What could the 2IC do on his own? Subedar Major Abdul Mannan made his moves based on the current situation. Roll call was at ten in the night, but some were there, some weren't. On meatless days, they ate the meat they had bought from outside. Apparently, there were funds but where did they come from? They got them from selling the tea and sugar from the ration store.

I gathered all this information over the three days I was quiet. Where would I start making sense of all this madness? After thinking about it, I called a meeting on the seventh day. The meeting was in the morning. I dressed properly and kept my cap on my head. The cap was new, and the brass decorations shone. According to orders, two men stood on either side and all the officers sat to the right. I had mingled with the officers over the last few days and toured the battalion with them. Then I would move on the subedar level, then naib subedar, and then I would move to the lower level. I wanted them to first see that the CO Shaheb and the officers were on the same page. Subedar Major Mannan had been informed earlier and he had already figured out how things stood because he had witnessed how, through the window on the third floor, I had thrown out the luxurious items in my office – the sofa, the carpet, the curtains. The rules in the army dictated that the CO would sit in his office and officers would march in, their boots echoing on

the floor. What was a carpet doing there? There would be one chair for the 2IC. Everyone else would remain standing. Only the officer and Subedar Major would be at ease, and everyone else would stand at attention. That's why I got rid of the sofa and carpet from my office to drive home the point that army regulations would be strictly followed, and even I was not exempt from them.

Before the meeting, the Subedar Major informed me that the CO would make a speech. As soon as the meeting began, I announced, "We'll have another meeting soon where you can ask questions and make your complaints. But you can make no demands. Today, none of this will be entertained. You will only listen today."

I continued, "You have all come into the army knowing the rules. If you don't like them, leave. As long as I am in charge, the battalion will be run according to those rules. One more thing. When there's a coup, we tend to scatter here and there. Hopefully, there won't be any more coups, and even if there is, we will remain here. No one will leave the area. There will be four LMGs in four corners and one will go to my home. If anyone has the slightest objection, you will be shot in the behind. The meeting's over."

I returned to my office. Soon, I received a phone call from General Shamsuzzaman. He said, "Can you come here please? It's urgent."

I went to the Second Capitol to the GOC's office to find everyone looking grave. As soon as I entered, the General asked, "What's happening at the battalion?" The AQK said, "You go. I'll sort this out."

As soon he left, closing the door behind him, the AQK jumped up and asked, "Did you really say all that at the meeting, Shombhu?"

"I did, sir."

He came forward and hugged me. "Was there any reaction?"

"What reaction, sir?"

He said, "Take a chair! Take a chair!"

I took a chair and sat. He had a good laugh and then said, "Ershad Shaheb called. He had heard about what happened and he wants me to sort you out. Tell me what I should do."

I thought about it for a moment, and then said, "Sir, why don't you punish me? First, a two-mile run, then PT, drill, breakfast, and then class. Lunch after twelve."

"And you will supervise everything?"

I said, "Sir, could you please write it out?"

"Well, I won't write everything – just the two-mile run. Everyday, except Sundays."

"Sure, sir."

Then he instructed to replace the chair in its original position, which I did. He asked me to remain standing and he called in the AQK.

He said, “First, send a letter stating that the entire 3 Engineering Battalion will have to do a two-mile run in the mornings.”

And to me, rather harshly, he said, “You can go now.” But it was obvious the tone was just a cover.

I left and the letter arrived right after. Letters and files about punishments were usually conveyed very quickly. I summoned the 2IC and told him, and then Subedar Major Mannan, everything. Mannan wanted to know when this would begin.

I barked, “What do you mean from when? Every morning, the entire battalion will assemble at the Mirpur Roundabout and run for two miles from there. They will return to the unit together. Anyone who fails will enter the Quarter Guard room. He will have to try again in the afternoon. If he still fails, he will remain the Quarter Guard room. Those who pass will then do PT, followed by a drill. Then breakfast, class, lunch. The rest will be routine work. There will be roll call at ten pm.”

Subedar Major Mannan questioned, “Sir, what you mean by entire battalion?”

“The sweeper, barber, cobbler, washerman, nobody is exempt. When it is wartime, everyone has to participate, right?”

“What if something gets stolen from the unit?”

I said, “No one will remain here except for the Quarter Guard and those who are not supposed to do the PT or drill.”

Now he came to the main point, “Sir, I am an elderly person, and I’m also a Subedar Major.”

“I’m the CO and a colonel. I’m elderly too. And the bullets don’t know who’s young or old. There are many old bullets – what if one of them strikes? So, you’ll have to run with me, the 2IC on one side, you on the other. We’ll be followed by the officers, then each company. If you wish to make others do something, you must do it yourself first.”

The next morning, I arrived to see the entire company present. The two-mile run was completed with the three of us leading. Slowly, we fell to the back. Except for two officers, everyone passed. Those two were sent to the Quarter Guard room. They were able to pass during the evening run. Adjutant Lieutenant Zaman conducted the drill after the PT. This was followed by breakfast, classes, and routine work.

I gave the order that the officers would have to send their salaries home and they would create entertainment like arranging games. Whether the soldiers were writing letters home, whether they were receiving replies was checked. The soldiers’ addresses were regularly updated and every section commander would check on the family of each soldier.

I regularly inspected the breakfast and lunch that was served to ensure that they were balanced. I checked whether anyone was gaining too much weight or losing too much. I ordered a blanket parade for those who might be gaining weight. Each man had to maintain a standard weight. I also checked on the roll call several times.

Finally, one day, I announced, “No one can drink out the cups available in the market. They must be army mugs. These would be used for tea and water, and kept clean. They would even be used to hold the water

needed for shaving. The mug would be life, this mug would be the army. We lined up everyone with the cups bought previously and, on the sound of a whistle, they were broken. Minced meat, chomchom[62] and jilapis[63] from the market were banned.

With regular monitoring, it was possible to bring the battalion under control. I believed that if we stayed with the jawans from six in the morning to ten at night, it was possible to keep them on track. If the officers, the JCO, and the havildars did their jobs, the battalion would be fine.

The next step was to make some books about the army compulsory reading for the officers. And I began to study books on law. In the process, I lost touch with the world outside.

Mustafa Sarwar DulaBhai lived in the house next to ours on Road 32. His three children, Nipa, Pavel, Russell, and our Nabil and Anis played together. Nabil and Anis both attended St. Joseph's where sports, along with studies, was encouraged. Brigadier Rouf lived one house over and a foreigner lived in the house opposite ours. Beyond that was the lake. The roads would be empty in the afternoon and the kids would freely ride their bikes on the road after school. There was a field in front of Mustafa Sarwar Bhai's house where they also played football. The house had a driveway where they played cricket. My mother-in-law and Ehsan lived at the 13/4 Dhanmondi house and the rest of the apartments had been rented. We usually visited each other, but my mother-in-law really wanted to get rid of a tenant and make room for us to stay. When I had to go to Rangpur, she insisted even more because Ameenah was alone with the kids.

Sometimes, I visited the GOC. I would receive a cup of tea from him. He was a quick-tempered but kindhearted gentleman, a good commander. He was extremely happy about the improvements in my battalion. His only regret was that this battalion was moving to Rangpur.

I called a meeting again. Once everyone arrived, I announced that they could speak their minds or ask for clarification about anything. Questions were usually pre-planned for meetings, but this didn't happen here. Several wannabe leaders stood up and soon progressed into making demands. I raised my hand and said, "No one makes or should make demands in the army. All you can speak about are your problems and advantages. This can include timely salaries, leave, the quality of food, enough time for sleep, whether anyone is being asked to do any unofficial job like being sent to an officer's home to do chores. This is not allowed in our battalion. You can ask for sports equipment like caro, ludu, snakes and ladders, so that you can chat and play in the common room after dinner. You can play or read and writer letters."

Everyone remained silent after I spoke but, soon, they became vocal: they said there was nowhere for their guests from the village to stay here. The guests also needed lunch.

Guests could be given a space to sleep and the soldiers could be given their sports gear, but the guests couldn't eat here. I added that I would speak to the GOC as it was a regulatory issue and the demand may not be met. In that case, things would go on as before.

[62] A sweetmeat
[63] A fried dessert, with a twisted shape, soaked in syrup

Before ending the meeting, I repeated, “You have all entered the army knowingly. If you don’t like it, you can leave. No one was coerced into coming here.” The Company’s JCOs and Subedar Majors took notes of what I had said.

The meeting had run on for a while, but it had all gone very smoothly.

Chapter Twenty-nine

To Rangpur with the Battalion

I received orders to take the battalion to Rangpur. We decided that we would scrub the quarters clean before leaving so that the incoming battalion were impressed. The joy of the job was infectious and spread through the battalion. The process often became competitive, egged on by us, to see who could be first, second or third. Then we would have a feast where everyone ate together.

Apart from the 2IC and Subedar Major Mannan, I assigned one or two sourcemen to each company. They would report back to me at intervals and update me on the entire battalion, especially on those who had been at the TV station and Mirpur Police Station during the coup, and those who had stood up with demands at the meeting despite being instructed by the Subedar Major and JCO. Gradually, I found out all the names, which I verified with the Mirpur Police Station. I didn't get all the information, but at least, there was some. I had forty-seven names. In a company of eight hundred, forty-seven sounded like a lot. It was obvious that they had to be removed from the Defense Services. I soon made a decision about what to do with them.

A special train from the airport to Rangpur was allocated. The luggage was sent ahead and we followed later. At the station, I was surprised to see Ameenah, Nabil, and Anis. The families of many other officers, including Faizur Razzak, were also present. The jawans' families had come too.

This was the first time Ameenah had come to see me off. She hadn't had to do this during the time when I used to work in the office because I never saw the need for it. I would wake at five and leave for work by 5.45 am, and I didn't support the idea of waking my wife up and troubling her because I merely had a cup of tea with a toast or two for breakfast.

I took leave from them and boarded the train. Before that, though, the GOC and the Divisional Headquarters officers also came. There was a sort of parade. The Subedar Major presented the parade to the 2IC who presented it to me. I said, "Everything's okay," and asked the GOC for permission to leave. The train started off. The GOC, Major General Shamsuzzaman raised his hand in farewell and we waved back.

The train would not stop at any station, but the driver had been notified about mealtimes. This is one of the advantages of being in the Defense Services – everything happened on schedule. The train sped on through the night. In the morning, just before we reached Rangpur, we were asked to stop and not enter the station before 7 am because the GOC and several officers were coming. This caused us a little trouble. Stopping the train and waiting for the GOC, and that too, early in the morning, seemed meaningless. Soon, we were overwhelmed from either side by the smell of a battalion answering nature's call. Still, we waited for a little while. Then I gave the order to move the train forward slowly because there was no reason for us to stand still in one location. Besides, we couldn't stand the stench anymore.

So the train drove on in this manner until, exactly at seven, we chugged into Rangpur Station. We all got off and saw that the GOC hadn't come. G-1 Sarif and AQ Shahed Hasan Selim were there though. Both of them were Lieutenant Generals, but junior to me. They walked around authoritatively for a while and left, but our food didn't arrive. As a result, some mild protests began. The unloading of the luggage was stopped. I noticed that, this time again, the same forty or fifty soldiers were leading the protests. I had

already told Subedar Major Mannan about this but the 2IC didn't know. The JCO and a few havildars were ready and, before the protests grew louder, these men were bound with ropes. Then they were tied to the electric poles in groups. Then I began to strike them with my hooked stick. Each one got what he deserved. I prepared forty-eight documents and said, "Sign this. You're being sent home. If you don't go, you'll each be court-martialled. And then, you won't receive any benefits. If you sign that, you won't be dismissed but you'll be taking forced retirement from the army."

They each began to wail but eventually signed. Then I said, "All the luggage will be unloaded and cleared. These men will remain tied to the poles. We will go to the unit and have breakfast there, whether that lasts till nine or ten in the morning.

At the unit, I sent all the forms by hand to the GOC, Major General Amjad Ahmed Chowdhury, but they did not return. On enquiry, I found out that the GOC was hesitating. He wasn't quite in agreement. So, eventually, I went to him. "Sir, if we don't dismiss these men, there will be trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"One. I'll not be here. Two. You won't be able to bring this battalion under control ever again. According to the rules, rebellion needs to be immobilized instantly and the chain of command reestablished, and then reported to the senior officer. I've done my job. If I'm wrong, please dismiss me. If not, then please support me."

He said just one thing, "Shahid, are you stirring up trouble the moment you arrive? Do you know there's been a coup and other trouble here?"

I said, "There will be no more coups from now on because steps like this weren't taken before, I'm sure. And this was done by appeasement. This is the military and you're better informed than I am."

To this, he said, "Go. I'll sign."

I left – with an air of calm but storming inside. I ate lunch at the Mess. I had said that I didn't need a house, so I was given a room at the Mess. My batman was still Obaidul. He had been with me since Mirpur. He told me that the battalion was now shaking in its boots."

"What about those forty-eight?"

"Crying."

"We'll talk only after seeing them off in the evening train."

Obaidul hesistated, then he said, "Sir, they know I'm your batman. They told me to tell you that they're ready to ask for forgiveness at your feet."

"Don't you dare! There's no such way out in the military."

We began with our two-mile run the next morning, followed by PT, drill, and classes. Everything had been organized beforehand.

I noticed that we needed boots and new clothes for the jawans. So I sent a letter to the Divisional Headquarter and met with the Ordinance Colonel to tell him of our needs. He said, “It’s the same situation everywhere. Let me see what I can do.”

The GOC called me in one day in the meantime and said, “There is a brigade of the 11 Division in Bogra. Work is going on there and it may soon become a division. You have to take your battalion and walk the seventy-two miles from here. Can you do it?”

I said, “I can. But we’ll need boots for that.”

The GOC’s face seemed to register a suspicion that my battalion might not be fit enough. Still, he said, “I heard that you have made your men extremely fit in the last few months. I don’t believe you’ll have any problem.”

Again, I said, “Sir, we need boots.”

The next day, the entire battalion was lined up. After handing over the parade, I said, “Very soon, we’ll be walking from Rangpur to Bogra. We have to go in full combat dress, so from tomorrow morning, there will be no more two-mile runs. But you must walk and run for an hour in the evening.”

The battalion did as instructed. Boots arrived in the meantime and distributed to those who needed them. The date and time of the order to move also arrived.

To the parade, I repeated, “We’re walking to Bogra. There will be no four-wheeled vehicles with us other than an ambulance. If you can’t walk, you can move on your knees. If you can’t do that, you must crawl. If you still can’t go on, if you become unconscious, the ambulance will take you to the hospital instantly. Each one of you must tie down your arms with sealing. If you have to answer nature’s call, you must take a guard with you. If anyone disarms you despite these measures, you must recover your arms. If you can’t, you should get on your hands and knees, and beg them. Say ‘Bhai, my CO is a terrible man. Please return my arms or he’ll make me sorry.’ If you still can’t get your arms back, please join him. Don’t come back.”

Ultimately, though, and on the 2IC’s request, the CO’s jeep brought up the rear, in case there was any other emergency. One evening, we began the trek from the Rangpur Cantonment. We had eaten around four or four-thirty. The 2IC, Subedar Major, and I led the way with the Adjutant and officers following with the company. We were so fit that in the very first night we covered 32 miles. The GOC checked on us once along the way. So did the G1, AQ, G2, and DQ. The Ordinance Provost came. We followed our orders, paying attention to none of them. The GOC was astonished. Yes, we truly walked 32 miles.

The next night, we walked twenty-five miles and only one JCO had to be carried to the hospital in the ambulance. Everyone else stayed on track.

I said, “Once we’re done walking, you will all have your snacks and sleep. No one will be awakened even if the GOC comes in the meantime. Not even me. Because all they do is ask, ‘Is the food okay?’ – a completely unnecessary question.”

That’s exactly what we did. No one woke up before time. We had to travel the rest of the way by the next night. The battalion was informed that they had to reach Bogra by seven in the morning. There would be a reception committee with the Brigade Commander. We arrived the Bogra Cantonment on the dot. The

reception committee was very happy to see us and so were those of us who had trekked those seventy-two miles. We had breakfast there, eating together. The Brigade Commander of the Core of Engineers, Brigadier Enamul Huq had had a large tent set up. He was a gentleman. After breakfast, we took a car back to Rangpur, without any issues. An artillery regiment had done the same seventy-two mile trek either alongside us, or after. I heard that that regiment had become scattered.

We returned to Rangpur by road. The trek had been successful in boosting the confidence of the officers, JCO, SCO, and the soldiers. The entire battalion seemed refreshed. They wanted to work, plant trees, make a flower garden. I said, "Do all those things, but ensure that it is within your boundary. Proceed with a plan."

That's how it was done. The Rangpur Cantonment was quite barren. General Amjad planted a lot of trees there but the Pakistanis had cut them all down.

After we returned to Rangpur, we had some motor vehicle exercises during which one car hit another. The car belonged to Lieutenant Azad's company. I summoned him and asked, "Azad, how did this happen?"

His answer, "Sir, the battery of the second car was down, so the first car was trying to pull it along and give it a jumpstart. We had to try three times before it restarted. Because the first car had stoppe, the second car ended up hitting it because the driver of the first car couldn't understand why the second car wouldn't brake once it restarted, and second car didn't think that the first car would halt suddenly. That's why it happened."

I said, "So thinking caused the accident!"

Agreeing, he said, "Yes, sir, it happened due to thinking."

I replied, "In the army, there is no scope for thinking. The army runs and will run on orders. There can be no shortcoming in the order that would require thinking on anyone's part."

I called the 2IC and told him to inform the entire battalion of the incident and that thinking would not be entertained. If they need to think, they can leave the army and take a boat out into the river, or wander around in a forest, writing poetry. The army is not a place for thinkers."

Nabil and Anis came to see our exercises during their school vacation. An airport had been opened at Thakurgaon where F-26 planes landed. They came in one of those. I took permission from the GOC and went to pick them up. They stayed with me and had a lot of fun. They even stayed the night in a tent during an exercise. The GOC was not pleased and I knew it was not right. During the exercise, my tent was pitched in the midst of a bamboo grove. The boys loved it. My batman, Obaidul, was a very familiar face to them. When the exercise was over, I put them on plane and they flew back home.

After seeing Nabil and Anis off, I don't know why but I decided to head off to Panchagarh, and then Tetulia. The roads were so bad that I didn't expect to see any vehicles, although there were one or two. The entire area was barren, except for an occasional straw hut. There was no one on the streets either. I learned that Panchagarh did not have electricity. There was one cinema theater which operated on a generator. The songs and dialogues of the movies were drowned by the noise of this generator. I also heard from someone here that there was some agricultural work here and a handful of people farmed the land. The rest of the people had nothing to do, so they slept. But I loved the area. One of the areas was named

Bhajanpur. There I saw a heap of stones by the roadside. The same man told me that they had been dug up from the ground. “People from the railway buy these stones from us and so do some private parties.” The tiny marketplace was comprised of a few shanties where the only light came from kerosene lamps. The shops barely had anything to sell. Opposite the bazaar were branches of different banks.

The thought of leaving my job resurfaced every few days. In spite of this, I kept working.

It was time for the exercises for the Division again. This time, however, we’d be doing advance to contact, defense and attack. The brigade and the infantry were here; the rest would continue with their work. The Engineers Battalion would conduct the defense at Palashbari, so I took my troops to the location. We found an area where there were plenty of trees with a field in the center. We set up camp here about two miles from the defense location. The entire battalion walked the two miles to the location in the morning and worked to set it up. I put my experience in Kasur, Pakistan, to work here. We built many tunnels and trenches. I assigned positions for the machine guns, the LMGs, and the section, platoon, company. I set up the battalion headquarters behind them. This was accessible through a tunnel and one to come to the front. A thin strip of a river ran past the front. The enemy would come from across the river and attack. The setting up was done. It took almost a month and now there were only three days left before we would have to defend our area. The attack would come from the opposite side. The enemy would first fire the artillery and we would fire back as soon as they appeared on the opposite bank. The GOC would come to observe and the place where he would sit needed to be elevated. So I even had this place constructed. Next to the road.

In the meantime, when I went to Rangpur one day, I blurted out everything to the GOC: “Sir, I don’t want to work anymore.” I also told him that after the exercise, I wouldn’t return to the unit. He immediately spoke to someone on the red telephone. I was sure it was either Ziaur Rahman or Ershad Shaheb. It was brief conversation. He hung up and said, “General Ershad will be visiting us the day after tomorrow. He will speak to you and he will also watch the exercises.

Fine. S I returned to Palashbari. And the scheduled day soon arrived. I went when the GOC summoned. He said, “Ershad Shaheb will arrive by helicopter and there will be a tennis match in the afternoon. He will have dinner at the Mess and observe the exercise all today from tomorrow morning. He will be at the field until nightfall. I have called you here to introduce you to him and you, Imtiaz, Ershad Shaheb, and I will play tennis. You and Imtiaz will be partners while Ershad Shaheb and I will be pair up. But you must be careful not to win because Ershad Shaheb doesn’t like to lose to anyone.

Ershad Shaheb arrived and, as planned, we played tennis. He did not say a word – we were just introduced. However, I got the feeling that he didn’t like me. I had felt this before too, back when I was in the BMA. Colonel Mannaf had been trying to explain something to Ershad Shaheb who didn’t get it. At one point, Mannaf, frustrated, said, “You can’t understand this because you’re not an officer from Kakuli’s PM. You’re a first course officer from Kohat’s OPS.” Apparently, Ershad Shaheb had been very upset.

After our game, I told the GOC that I was going as I still had some preparations left to do in the field for the defense exercise I’d have to show them the next day.

They would be going to the field at 10 am the next day. We simulated the artillery firing. We placed the explosives strategically so it would look like they were fully exploding. A JCO was tasked with the

arrangements during the rehearsal. Everything else was placed accordingly. We each took our positions in the morning, ready and waiting. At 10 am, we saw a car approaching, not a jeep. There would be a loud sound when the JCO set the explosives off, so he was waiting with a scarf wrapped around his ears because of the cold and his helmet on top of that. As soon as he saw the car approaching, the JCO set off the explosives. Who was there to stop him? Still I tried. When his scarf was taken off, I saw two coins tucked inside his ears. Shocked, I thought if this happened after so much discipline, what could happen in a war? Where would I get more explosives now? We managed to collect a couple of them though and wired them up nearby. Ershad Shaheb's entourage appeared soon after. The explosives went off as he came and he was happy. As he drove further on, the firing began. It was all for sow. Ershad Shaheb got down and inspected everything: the tunnel system, the trenches, the MG posts, the LMG posts – and he was pleased. With Ershad Shaheb was one of his toadies, General Ashraf. He demanded loudly, "Have you made arrangements for tea?" In the same tone, I responded, "This is not a tea party. It's a defense demo."

Ershad Shaheb turned to look at me. Then they left. In the evening, there was dinner for the battalion and him. But it was normal fare, the food that the troops ate regularly. A lot of people were displeased but I didn't care. The troops entertained the crowd for some time. Then Ershad Shaheb was placed on a platform and the troops carried him around, dancing. Amjad Shaheb had said that he liked it when people did this. After the dance, Ershad Shaheb asked me, "The army has fed you, clothed you, paid you, made a man of you – and you want to leave the army?"

I replied, "I was paid by the day, I returned it with labor by the day. I don't owe anything. Please let me go."

He didn't say another word after that.

Later on, though, he spoke only to Amjad Shaheb about me. Even till today, I have no idea what they talked about, but the day after Ershad Shaheb left, I received a letter stating that I had been attached to the log area commander in Dhaka even though when he was leaving, he had said, "Farewell to arms."

General Amjad immediately withdrew me from the battalion and Hamid from 3 Engineers came the same day to take over my battalion. I took refuge in a tent on the field of the Divisional Headquarter.

Chapter Thirty

Joining the Dhaka Log Area

After completing the paperwork and having the tea that Amjad Shaheb offered me, I got on a train and left Rangpur. Prior to this, I had called Ameenah and told her that I was coming home for good. I asked her to tell Kamal to send a car to the station to pick me up.

Ameenah said, “First come, and then we’ll talk.”

I learned that they were concerned with my mother-in-law’s illness. When I alighted at the station, I looked around to find that Major Ikramullah had sent a car for me. So I rode in that to 13/4. After the initial greetings and some talk, I went to pick up the phone to make a call when Ameenah stopped me.

“You’re not going to call anyone.”

“I’m just calling Kamal.”

“No, not even Kamal.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Kamal Bhai called to say that you should neither call him nor see him.”

I was dumbfounded by her words. I somehow managed to put the phone down, feeling that the world had dried up. Ameenah stood strong. We didn’t speak about this anymore. Everyone in the family had been sick with typhoid, so they were all staying in this house. My mother-in-law kept insisting, “Son, let me make an apartment available so you can all come and stay here.”

I spent a few days at my in-laws’ and then went home.

I joined work. The log area commander, Brigadier Bari was a charming gentleman. He was a humorous man, laughing a lot and making others laugh with him. We hit it off instantly. I asked, “Sir, I submitted a J form because I want to leave the army. What am I doing here at the log area now?”

He replied, “I’ll tell you later.”

Things went on like this for a few days. One day, I was sitting in Brigadier Bari’s office when the phone rang. After listening to the speaker at the other end, Brigadier Bari said, “Listen, if Shahid must be courtmartialled, do it with the Army Headquarters. Don’t drag me into it.”

He hung up. But who had called? I guessed that it must have been Ershad or Adjutant General Moin.

Brigadier Bari said, “You heard, right?” He fished out a letter and showed me: “They’re saying that you have broken the law and remained involved in the Abahani Club. You’re to be courtmartialled, but you’ll be given a showcause notice first.”

I said, “Fine.” So he served me the notice. I took that showcause notice and went to see Brigadier Habib. He took the letter to General Shawkat. Brigadier Habib informed me that General Shawkat had said, “I’m also involved in a sports club in my neighborhood. They keep asking me to visit, so I go there sometimes. They even persuaded me to be Vice-President.”

What could I do now? I decided to write a letter and meet General Mannaf at the Army Headquarter. I showed the same letter to Harun and Nasim. Harun said, “What courtmartial? Who’ll do it? That Ershad! Go home, Shombhu Bhai, and don’t worry.”

Harun grew up in Jessore, the son of the District Judge. My paternal uncle used to teach him. He was a good man. Anyhow, I gave that same letter to Brigadier Bari. He said, “This is enough. You don’t need to come in everyday.”

I also made some noise at the Army Headquarter. Some called me Shahid, some said Shahid Bhai, and others addressed me as Shombhu Bhai. Each one asked me not to worry, that nothing would come of it. President Ziaur Rahman would get me dismissed.

One day, Hena Mama (Abu Hena), Joint Secretary to the Defense Ministry, called me. “Mama, can you come in one day?” So I did. He listened to everything, and then showed me a whole file with my J form. Even the old applications were there. It was true – nothing was misplaced in the army. But they hid things. Abu Hena Mama explained, “I don’t think this will work. I can check though. I will submit the file with your letter in it and see if I can get it signed. But I’m not too sure.”

Later, one day, Hena Mama called me. He sounded happy. I went to see him and he presented to me my application on which was signed, in green ink, the Z of Zia Shaheb. We laughed and ate together. Then I asked, “Mama, how did you manage it?”

He said, “Listen, Mama, you guys are from the army. But we have to tackle the civilians, we have turn day into night and vice versa. Just be happy. You’ll also receive your letter in due time.”

My head did not go blank now. Business ideas went through my head. If I were to do business, I needed a company. I began to think. Encountering my younger brother, Hasan, I told him to think of a name for a company. A couple of days later, Hasan proposed the name, “Castle.” I liked it and I called my company, “Castle Construction Co., Ltd.” which still runs successfully. It was born in 1979.

Chapter Thirty-one

Farewell, Army

The letter arrived. I opted not to go for LPR (Leave Pending Retirement). After getting my release order, I came to the gate and said, “I entered these gates in ’60 and I’m leaving here in ’79. Farewell, Army.”

But I don’t think the Army ever leaves you. It stays with you till death. I came home and announced the news. Then my relatives heard, but no one could really be happy for me. I had left a secure life to dive into an uncertain future. How could anyone support that? Now, I also realized, I need money to build my new life. I soon discovered a source – I could sell half of my pension and I could get almost sixty thousand taka from it. I had about two thousand in my pocket which I handed over to Ameenah, while I went after my pension. I had all the paperwork prepared, but one morning, from the newspaper, I discovered that the water tank in Lalasuri had fallen due to a hurricane. I was in Motijheel at the time where Commodore Mujib was now working as a civilian. So I went to his office with the paper in my hand. He was always happy to see me, but I had no happy news to share. I said, “Do you know that the water tank in Lalasuri has fallen in a hurricane?” I showed him the paper, but he burst into laughter. I said, “Sir, look, now they will come after me.”

He asked, “Why? M A Khan, Akbar, Brigadier Habib constructed it.”

“If the tank stands, it’s their credit. But if it falls, it’s my fault.”

I got proof soon enough. When I went to collect the money from selling my pension, I discovered that they had penalized me for twenty thousand taka. I asked why the amount was less to be told that the Navy had fined me because the tank in Lalasuri had fallen. So I would now receive just forty thousand taka.

Didn’t I tell you that when you go to work somewhere, everyone welcomes you. When you work like a mad man, they congratulate you. As soon as the work is over, the questions arise. When you finish the job and leave, no one will ask you to return, and even talk about you behind your back. This was the reward for working hard and well. So, should no one do good work? Well, anyone who loves his job will do his best, and those who loved to talk, would do so regardless.

I collected my forty thousand. It was still a substantial amount.

Chapter Thirty-two

Attempts at Working Independently

I spent a few days with nothing to do. I woke my sons up in the morning, and while they dressed, so did I. I dropped them off at school and went off to visit different people in search of work. I even visited the army, naval and air force MES and met with a couple of people. They chatted and I chatted with them, but a few days later, their faces grew dark. I also went to innumerable other places outside the army. Everyone would enthusiastically want to hear my stories, and being the storyteller that I am, I had no trouble regaling them. But when it came to giving me work, nothing was available.

This is the first time in my life that I was unemployed. I didn't know what Ameenah and the boys thought or what my relatives felt. After dropping the boys at school one day, I had nowhere to go, so I went to Ramna Park. I sat there for some time because I didn't want to go home. Everyone would assume I was trying to find something. I would pick up the kids at one and go home. At intervals, I walked around. One day, I even lay down on a park bench, and perhaps, fell asleep. Then, when I woke up, I went to pick up the kids and went home. I think I began to like parks from that moment.

During the time I sat on the bench in the park, I met a variety of people. Some came for walks, some ran in their unique ways. There was a teaseller who kept asking me if I wanted tea, while there were others selling "Thanda," or cold drinks. Peanut sellers were abundant though. One of these peanut sellers came to me and said, "Here, take a packet." I tried to shoo him away but he persisted. "You're just sitting here with nothing to do. Why not chew on some peanuts? Your time will pass nicely." So I finally took a packet. It was as I sat in the park one day, peanut packet in hand, that I suddenly spied to my left a contractor from old times, coming forward with a grand gesture. His name was Ali Akbar. He had done the swimming pool at the Navy Headquarter. I had never seen him in the park before. I hoped that he wouldn't spot me, but the path went past me. He came to a sudden stop on seeing me but he didn't utter a word, not even a greeting. I also remained silent. He turned around just as suddenly and walked away. I threw away my packet of peanuts and got up. I got in the car and drove around Motijheel for a while. I saw the National Sports Council building where I had worked in 1965. Then Hotel Purbani, Palwell Market – another workplace. So many new buildings were coming up. People like me were building them, so why wouldn't I find work? As I pondered, it became time to pick up the children.

That night or the next, I received a phone call. It was Colonel Lokman, Commander, Military Engineering Service, Bangladesh Army. He was my student. We had been in the POW camp in Chakdaulat, Pakistan. A very organized person. He asked, "Sir, what are you doing tomorrow?" What could I reply? As I thought to myself, what *could* I be possibly doing? Of course, I couldn't say that, so I asked, "Why?" He asked if I could stop by the next day. I asked when. He said, "Come in the morning." I said, "I'll drop the kids at school and come."

The next day, when I went, he hospitably sat me down and offered me tea and biscuits. It was still too early for biscuits, so I just had the tea. After chit-chatting for a while, he asked me directly, "Sir, what do you do at Ramna Park?"

I said, "Oh for goodness' sake! Did you just call me to ask that? I while away my time there."

“That’s not appropriate. Sir, we respect you so much. You have such a good reputation. You shouldn’t be doing such a thing. Please come and sit here everyday. Read the papers, Newsweek, Time, and try to find work.”

“No one’s willing to give me work.”

He said, “I’ll try.”

And he did. His Director, Works of Chief Engineers was Colonel Sharif. I had been turned away there once before, but this time, Colonel Lokman managed to get me a job. The contract was to build C-type quarters at the Savar Cantonment. This was my first independent job. I began work. After dropping off the boys at school, I left for my workplace and returned in the late afternoon. I told Lokman, “If there’s any work in Jessore, I could do that too.”

It’s good to have faith and trust in others. Sellers gave me bricks, rods and cement on credit. In fact, everything I need for construction was given to me on credit by those old comrades. Aziz resigned from the Navy and came to work at my site. A couple of others did the same. One floor of 13/4 became my office. Hasan came and stayed in Dhaka now and then. Once, he brought a man named Munir with him. He worked at Concord. Later, he joined us and Ameenah, my wife, typed all our correspondence. My old contractor friends from the Navy didn’t only supply me with raw materials, they also helped me with cash, which I returned as soon as I was able.

I also began investigating our opportunities abroad. In the meantime, I had been enlisted with PetroBangla and Tita, and I even got a job through them. The job was to install 8 inch diameter pipes for the gas pipeline, for low pressure. I went to see that as well in the morning. I had no machines; everything was rented. It was hard to do the work. Titas was still an honest place and their work was high quality. Putul from Lahore was the manager. Unfortunately, though, I suffered a setback. A gas contractor by the name of Mahmud helped me get the work done, but I lost half of the profit I had made constructing the C-type quarters in this project. Lokman, in the meantime, gave me orders to construct two B-type quarters – at a good rate. I made a good margin here and I gave them quality work. I also got a contract in Jessore for the Air Force. Hasan supervised that. I also decided to get into the jute business with Mustafa Sarwar DulaBhai as Ameenah wanted. I had to loan some money from the bank, so I rented two warehouses to show where I would store my jute and from where I would sell.

I persuaded Barrister Rafiqul Huq (Rafiq Mama) to speak to Janata Bank so that I could get a loan. With his help, I got eight lakhs. Mustafa Sarwar Bhai took the money to buy the jute, but later, I learned that he had bought it all in his own name. DulaBhai said, “It will be necessary to travel to London or America to sell this jute.”

By now, I had made enough money to send Ameenah and my two boys for a vacation in America during the summer holidays. Barrister Hossain, from London, and a friend of Mustafa Bhai’s, went with Ameenah. I went to London a few days later where I stayed at Mustafa DulaBhai’s house. Ameenah was still in America at the time. Taheerah and Reza were there too. Mustafa DulaBhai took me to an office party in London one day and introduced me to a lot of people. He also took me sightseeing. Shiribu, Nipa, Pavel, Russel had also gone with him. I would go to America after my time in London and Mustafa DulaBhai demanded that they would all go too.

When we landed at New York's JFK airport, we found that no one had come to pick us up. Even though it was a weekend, Taheerah was busy and Reza had gone to a concert. We went to the Central Rail Station when suddenly, from behind me, I heard Nabil and Anis shouting, "Abbu!" Turning around, I saw Ameenah too. Everyone was laughing. I asked, "What's going on?" They said that they had also just arrived here from Boston.

There were hugs all around. It was late by then and I was wondering where to look for a hotel when Ameenah said, "Taheerah has an apartment here. We can go there." So we took a taxi to our destination.

Taheerah's apartment was tiny with two bedrooms, a living, and a kitchen space. It wasn't big enough for all of us. Still, it took care of our first night. Taheerah wasn't home.

I wasn't feeling too well. Around ten in the morning when I was struggling to get up, I saw Taheerah's furious face and our luggage tossed outside. I knew we were being kicked out. I managed to find a hotel in Manhattan for us the next day. It was a cheap hotel and the carpet smelled musty. Still, we took one room for us and one room for Mustafa DulaBhai and his family. Taheerah came to visit us here, and so did Reza. We had a great time in our room. It was in the hotel that I met my first businessman, Abdul Awal Mintu, an acquaintance of Mustfa Dulabhai's. He took us sightseeing around New York. This is when I saw the famous Statue of Liberty, but my heart was in Bangladesh and my work. On the way back home, we stayed over in London again at Mustafa DulaBhai's home. Hossain Bhai also took great care to inquire into our well-being. He was a charming person – knowledgeable, intelligent, and obliging.

When we returned to Dhaka, we heard that Boro Bhai's oldest daughter, Jolly, was getting married. The groom was a Captain with the Army Signal. The wedding festivities in the house were wonderful. All the cousins were here in one place and their joy at being together was a pleasure to see.

Boro Bhai, in the midst of all the joy, approached me, "Can you give me about twenty-five thousand taka for Jolly's wedding? There are so many expenses."

I gave him without question. A few days later, he said, "It would be helpful to get another ten thousand." I gave him that too. I also gave a substantial amount of jewelry to Jolly as a wedding present. The wedding took place on February 23rd, 1982. My employees were all instructed to help out at the wedding and things went without too much of a hitch. Jolly was beautiful and her groom was good-looking, and it pleased everyone to see the new couple.

On January 26th, 1986, Boro Bhai's second daughter, Milly got married. He asked for thirty-five thousand taka for this wedding and I gave him the amount instantly. Milly was also presented with a good amount of jewelry and the wedding took place amidst much laughter and joy.

A few days later, it was Naila's wedding and the process of the two earlier weddings was repeated.

Once I returned to Dhaka, I became deeply involved in my work. With great initiative, I tried to get more contracts, but it was all very difficult. When Brigadier Kader was posted to the Air Force, I went to see him but to no avail. Everywhere, it was the old contractors who were preferred and among the newer ones, Kamal had managed to get his finger in every pie. He was ploughing through contracts with great bravado. General Ershad was a great well-wisher of his.

How could I possibly make a place for myself? Still, Brigadier Kader offered me a small job. Mujib from the Navy also gave me a job in Khulna, which incurred quite a big loss. Actually, it was Dark Colonel Mujib who was responsible for my loss. I also got a couple of contracts in Jessore which Hasan usually took care of. But how long could I continue doing small, odd jobs?

I went to Mustafa DulaBhai and said, "The interest on the bank loan is accumulating. What use will there be in buying any jute now?"

He said, "Maybe it won't happen this year. The jute isn't good quality."

"Return my money, then," I retorted.

After pursuing him for some time, he showed me some calculations: had we bought the jute, we'd have to store it in a warehouse. The rent of warehouse was this or that much. From the amount I had lent him, he had subtracted that hypothetical amount, and started returning 20-30 thousand a month. For now, then, the jute business was a bust. The loan amount, with the interest, grew to a substantial amount. Janata Bank filed a case against me. I went to court and, after returning 50,000 taka, I proposed to return the rest gradually. The judge agreed.

Later, though, because I made some profit from jobs here and there, I was able to quickly return the entire amount. I had taken the loan from the branch at Farmgate where the manager was Bablu from Jessore, my classmate. He used to be a very close friend. He died in an F-28 crash on his way to Dhaka from Chittagong in 1985.

Frustrated with Mustafa DulaBhai, I finally told him a story. It was about when Nabil and Anis visited Rangpur. A fair had been going on at the time and they were wandering around there. Nabil had returned to Dhaka and told his mother that he could almost have bought her a sari if he had just one taka. Or if he had bought a lottery ticket. If he had won the lottery, he could have brought her the sari. It was the same as me – if I had bought the jute, I wouldn't have been hurt so badly.

But what was the point? He didn't listen to anyone. He only talks. So what I said floated away with the wind. Around this time, I heard that there was going to be limestone mining in Joypurhaat. I went off to London to learn more about this line of work. There, I found a company called Edmund Mattel. Mr. Mackenzie was the MD whom I managed to convince. Within a few days, they came to Dhaka. I drove Mr. Mackenzie and their director, Mr. Hitching, who had worked in India before, in my tiny Starlet to Joypurhaat. We went to the limestone mining area by train as there was no other way to get there. That train had no schedule, coming and going as it pleased, but we had to take it. When we returned to Joypurhaat, the General Manager Anwarul Huq treated us to dinner.

We returned to Dhaka in the moning. Everything that could go wrong, did: a delay at the ferry, some trouble on the road, blockade, a late train. Still, Mackenzie was amused. I took them to PetroBangla, and then to a limestone office to meet a man named Jamil. He was a congenial man and everything went well. Only after this did I learn secretly that the minister Colonel Akbar had already decided who would get the contract. So, applying for the tender was useless. I had to dismiss the idea of limestone mining.

Around this time, the government decided to import rice. I went to Bangkok now to find out if if I become a rice importer agent for the government. Kamal from Vantage came with me. The chairman of the agency was General Bacchu Karim. Unfortunately, small talk was all there was. So I didn't get this job either.

Then I heard that the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation would buy ships. I wondered if I could get into the shipping business, so I decided to go to Greece with Kamal from Vantage. The route we decided to take was via Calcutta and Bombay, followed by a direct flight to Athens. We even landed in Athens but because we had no visa, we were not allowed to enter. Those who had come to receive us had to try different processes for five hours before we were released. After discussions, we found out that we would have to go to Italy to see the ships. So we did. The ships were of the RoRo (Roll on, Roll off) type. We were taken to the yard and shown around in detail. The enormous ship was almost complete. There were several other buyers, but we could also possibly get it. We had German investors – that is, they would provide the funds. So the rest of the discussion would take place in Germany. That was our next stop. A lot of calculations were done and we got to know who would receive what amount and how much bribe we'd have to pay. I saw a new world opening up before my eyes. Each ship would cost eighteen million dollars. After our talks, we went to London and I realized my pockets were almost empty. There was a hotel close to Hossain Shaheb's house, a bed and breakfast for twelve pounds. The proprietor was a Bangali but the manager was English. This manager was also the morning chef. A maid came to make the beds. If I had a breakfast of 3 or 4 pieces of toast, bread, and two eggs, I didn't need lunch. We would go around all day, Barrister Hossain accompanying us, and have dinner at his house at 12 Broadwalk, South Woodford, London, E18). I don't think I'll ever forget his support at that time, but we didn't accomplish much here.

We returned to Dhaka. This time, I went to Commodore Mujib to see the ship. He was the Chairman of the Bangladesh Shipping Corporation at the time and Captain Nurul Haque was Minister. I had bought a white suit and red tie in Bangkok, and that's what I wore to meet Commodore Mujib in his office. He had a headful of hair that he backbrushed. On seeing my new outfit, he had a lot of fun at my expense. I never went to see him in such an outfit again. My mustache had grown out into what they call a handlebar mustache.

I also went to Captain Nurul Haque Bhai's office. There was no dearth of hospitality on his part. The evaluation of the ship and the processing began. I believed that everything would work out. But nothing eventually did. Bangladesh was not buying ships. I asked, "Why did you say you were going to?" I got no reply. Much later, I understood that it was all related to the cost of production. If it matched, they'd take it, if it didn't, then they wouldn't. But the question was how much were they willing to accept? Payment was being made, credit was given, the ship would arrive, but still they wouldn't take it.

Colonel Sikander of the Navy came in as the Army DWCE. I went to see him although a couple of people warned me that the way I had left him before could only spell trouble for me now. But nothing of the sort happened. In fact, he seated me and chatted. And he chatted in such a manner that it looked like nothing had happened between us before. He gave me a job, a relatively big job, within a few days. I had to build a firing range in Bogra, where training and rifle shooting would be conducted. The work, though, had to be done using a new type of German technology. The plan had been conjured up by General Amjad at the Army Headquarter. I got the job – it was a good one, albeit a difficult one. But there would be profit. Colonel Sikander gave me several other jobs later too.

I was called to the Air Force now, and told that a hanger was to be constructed. Brigadier Kader asked me, “Can you build a hanger?”

I replied, “Sir, we’ll need a foreign expert for this.”

He said, “Find one.”

I went to Bangkok to meet with Mr. Surasik. He said he had an expert and would call him to meet me. I called Brigadier Kader to let him know and asked him to come to Bangkok as well. He said he would bring the Second-in-Command of the Air Force, Humayun Kabir, with him, but I would have to bear the cost of the air ticket, hotel, food, and other expenses. They came, along with all the necessary drawings. The hanger expert and his team arrived and Humayun Kabir questioned them. He made the situation sound very difficult. Then I took them to Singapore, after some investigations, we returned to Bangkok the next day. Humayun Kabir said he would spend another two nights here before returning.

Then I noticed that Humayun kept consulting with Mr. Surasik in whispers and going here and there with him. I saw him getting clothes from expensive shops – he ordered a suit, tie, shirt, sportswear and what not – but nothing for Brigadier Kader, or me. Mr. Surasik and Humayun Kabir were doing everything. The following day, they had fittings for the clothes. In addition, of course, there was the nightly entertainment. They had come to Bangkok with great knowledge, so Mr. Surasik took them to a striptease show where they behaved scandalously. The heartless Humayun gurgled with laughter, expressing his delight by slapping Surasik on the palm. Brigadier Kader, unable to stand it any longer, said we should leave and go for a meal. The round table we sat at swiveled around and we sat with our legs on the floor. Then began the the loving and caring. A bare-chested beauty brought our food – I can’t write about the rest because those who know me from reading my novel, *Bhoirob*, understand how shy I am, so you just have to use your imagination. For the smart, a signal is enough. However, when we left, two of the girls got into the car with Surasik and Humayun while Brigadier Kader and I went back to the hotel separately.

We returned to Dhaka a couple of days later. Humayun’s wife came to the VIP lounge, welcoming her husband back with kisses, and escorting him out ceremoniously. Humayun was a bastard. No – I can’t feel satisfied in calling him a bastard – he was vile.

A few days later, a large package of clothes, addressed to me, arrived from Bangkok. I delivered it to Humayun Kabir at the Air Force Headquarter. He took the clothes into the restroom and tried them on, one by one. I still had no clue about who was footing the cost because he hadn’t mentioned anything about the bill. I had no receipt either.

I spent a lot of time planning for the hanger when Brigadier Kader called me one day and said, “There’ll be no hanger.” I was stunned – I had spent so much money already and now there was to be no hanger?

Sensing my horror, he said, “Shahid, even though it won’t be of equal value, I’ll give you some other work to make up for it.”

I informed Mr. Surasik that there would be no project and in response, he sent me a bill for eighty thousand taka. I went to the Air Force and handed the bill to Humayun Kabir. He said, “What is this bill for? Why should I pay it?”

I asked, “Sir, who will pay it then?” He said, “You will! If [again, that “if”!] you’d got the job, you’d have made a profit. This is just a percentage from that profit. You shouldn’t be asking for money back after you pay a percentage.”

He insulted me thus and sent me out. I withstood many an insult, many a pain, to finally pay that bill, particularly because Kamal had somehow become involved here and he had called to humiliate me too. And Mr. Surasik was Kamal’s friend and his partner in the aluminum business, apart from being his partner in various other things.

Interestingly, the factory that Colonel Malek and Mr. Surasik had established, Bangladesh Thai Aluminum, was not an actual one. He merely sold the goods that Surasik sent over from Singapore, saying that they were made in this factory. He had even taken a letter from Ershad Shaheb stating that there would be no other competitors in this industry in the country. This, however, later led to a horrible dispute between Colonel Malek and Kamal.

When Brigadier Mansur Afzal became DWCE, I, that is, Castle, was given several contracts for constructing high-rise (five-story) buildings. He was a good man, a good friend, honest and brave. When Ameenah and Nabil had been under house arrest (from September 1 to November 3, 1971) at 30 Cavalry Road, Mansur Afzal had gone to see them once or twice. Lt. Churchill had at one time lived at this 30 Cavalry Road. Captain Mujib lived next door but he never spoke to them. Who ever speaks to house arrestees?

Chapter Thirty-three

Castle Construction Company, Ltd.

I established the Castle Construction Company, Ltd. in 1979 with the intention of starting a construction business. From its inception, the company has been a constructions and contracting firm as well as a consultancy company. Within a very short time, the company gained a reputation for all kinds of architechtural and structural design, sanitary and plumbing design, master plans, building construction, and directing construction styles. The company also began to work in the fields of mining, hydrocarbons, and gas pipelines. Several projects were successfully completed on installing gas distribution lines across rivers as well as 6 inches to 30 and 36 inch gas pipelines. Just a few days ago, Castle installed 20 inch pipes for 1000 PCI high pressure gas transmission from the south of the Chitra River to Kachua, Jessore. In addition, Castle has also worked with Britain's Welldreill and Ireland's Tallow on fabrication, erection, electrical installation, techno-economic feasibility studies, industrial consultancy, hydrocarbon studies, etc. Later, Castle Construction Company, Ltd. successfully established a sister industry to produce SPC electric poles, railway sleepers, and other concrete materials. All of this work is still going on.

Welldreill and Business with Castle Consultancy

My friend from Lahore, Mursharrof, was the Director, Planning at PetroBangla. He called me in one day and said that there was a company named Welldreill with whom they consulted. Currently, they were working in Bakhrabad, Bangladesh. There would be more work in the near future and their agent was Ashfaq, who used to be a minister. Unfortunately, there had been a dispute. He said to me, "Why don' you do something? Go to London. I'll give you their address and card. Meet with the people from Welldreill."

Musharrof Shaheb was never loquacious. I listened to him and went to London, staying again at the bed and breakfast. I contacted Barrister M N Hosain in whom I confided. He phoned and set up an appointment for me. I set off. We met at a cricket club past the airport for lunch and discussion. Welldreill's MD was P H Huckin or Hugh Huckin. Barrister M N Hossain drove me there in his Mercedes 600. I was wearing that same white suit, with that red tie, mustache twisted nicely, a reddish hue on my face, hair brushed back. I introduced myself but did not give any card. I said, "I own Castle Construction Company, Ltd. It began in 1979. I'm the Managing Director, BSc Civil Engineering and a retired colonel."

Mr. Hugh listened to me in surprise. Then he handed me his card. We sat in the sun, outside the cricket club. Hossain Bhai began the conversation which lasted for a while. I almost had to bite him to get him to stop. We had lunch. Years later, when Nabil was old enough to handle the business, Hugh told him about our first meeting: "The first time I saw your father, he had been all dressed up. His large mustache and his reddish face made me think that I was about to be taken in by a Mexican."

Soon, Mr. Hugh looked at his watch and said he had to go. We would talk again some other time. Quickly, I said, "Come to London tomorrow."

The credit for this idea of inviting him goes to Hossain Bhai. Hugh agreed readily and said he'd be there at 10 am. I gave him the location of Hotel Sheraton. Hossain Bhai couldn't be present the next day but after breakfast, I went to the Sheraton myself. Mr. Hugh arrived in his car. MDs and Chairmen over there usually drove themselves. I received him at the hotel and escorted him to the coffee shop. We talked for a

while and I managed to convince him because he didn't want to work with Ashfaq any more. Then he asked for my room and phone number. I said, "I'm not staying here." He asked, "Where are you staying?" I wanted to say, "Fool!" Aloud, I said, "If I could stay here, why would I chase after you? I'm staying at a bed and breakfast. If you give me work, I could stay here."

Hugh had a good laugh at my words. His head bent backwards in mirth. Then he said, "The job is yours."

He shook hands and left, saying, "We'll meet at the airport tomorrow." I asked, "Why the airport?"

"Because you and Ashfaq are going back on the same flight."

"I hope there won't be any trouble at the airport," I said.

He replied, "No – because I don't know you."

I told Hossain Bhai everything that night. The next morning, we headed to the airport where we soon spotted Hugh in conversation with Ashfaq. The latter's face was gloomy. We returned to Dhaka. There would be a tender within a few days for the Hydrocarbon Habitats Studies and, one by one, for the overhauling of the wells. Even the small one would cost over a million dollars and the hydrocarbon study would cost about three and a half million dollars. I had to again go back to London for the paperwork. Eventually, though, in 1985, we got the job of conducting the Hydrocarbon Habitat Studies.

This study was conducted under the guidance of PH Huckin's Team Leader from Welldreil. There were ten foreign consultants and ten local officers from PetroBangla.

PetroBangla and Welldreil, thus, completed this extremely important work. Mr. Gordon Fowler was the Chief Consultant of Welldreil. It is not possible to list here all the steps that had to be taken to complete this work. In addition, what was most memorable was Mr. Gordon Fowler's physical and knowledge contribution to not only Welldreil, but to PetroBangla and to the new members of the team. A lot of foreigners had worked at PetroBangla, among whom was a man named Sweetman. His activities were just as sweet as his name. He was a wonderful person, but there was something a little off about him. Once, he went to Chittagong to release some goods that had arrived for them. And then he disappeared – for two or three days. It turned out that he was in Cox's Bazaar. He returned but a few days later, a poster from the Tourism Corporation was published. It showed a man in swimming trunks standing in the ocean with a swimsuit-clad woman. The man was Sweetman and the girl with him, a missionary. This was scandalous and Sweetman was sent away from the country within the week.

Peter Hugh Huckin, the Chairman and MD of Welldreil, invited me and my family to his daughter's wedding. Mr. Huckin's country home was quite a distance from the city. His house was almost two hundred years old – almost a castle. The house stood on a few acres of land and the wedding was a grand one. There were guests from all over the world.

Huckin had arranged hotel accommodation for us and a car for our travel. On the day of the wedding, we went to the church in the car and then on to the castle-like house for a feast. The feast for the innumerable guests lasted till dinnertime. After the wedding, the new couple took off in the groom's company's helicopter to their honeymoon destination. It was wonderful to experience an event like this of a different religion in a different country in a different environment.

The pleasure had been heightened because of Inam. Mr. Huckin owned a few horse-drawn carriages. Around evening, Inam had climbed into one of these without the coachman's knowledge. Inam was so small that the coachman didn't notice him when he started off a ride. It was then that Inam started screaming and heaping all the Hindi insults he had picked up from watching Indian movies on the coachman. Fortunately, the coachman knew no Hindi! So they just burst into laughter at Inam. It was only after Mr. Huckin, Nabil, and I managed to stop the coach and get Inam down did his firing stop.

I worked with Mr. Huckin for a long time, and when he grew too old to handle it, he sold his company. But he maintained a beautiful personal relationship with me to the very end. He passed away in 2008.

Chapter Thirty-four

Gemini Seafood

Sometime along the way, ICB's Khaleque joined me. He came up with the idea of setting up a seafood processing plant in Khulna. He showed me the paperwork and the project. In the meantime, Hossain Bhai appeared on the scene from London. Hossain Bhai was actually from Assam, a barrister living in London, but he had friends by the dozen in Dhaka. Mustafa Sarwar was one of them. I got involved through him. I told him that I needed a bank to finance me so I could set up a seafood plant.

He took me to the MD of Krishi Bank, Khairul Kabir. After he listened to my plan, he said, "Yes, it's possible." He called in the GM, Salauddin, who looked to me like a cunning man. He came in and seemed to look carefully at each one of us, as if sizing us up. He said, "Submit the project and I'll let you know after evaluating it."

We began to work on the project, soon completing it and submitting it to BKB. The file went up and the file went down. There was another Salauddin there, the project officer. But the file seemed to get stuck with the GM. The file refused to move from his office. I sent someone to inquire and Khaleque Shaheb did the same from his end. A friend of Mintu's, Nowsher Shaheb, a good, honest accountant, discovered that we needed to give Salauddin something. Khaleque Shaheb took care of it.

I went to BKB to find that the file had begun to move. But we couldn't only process shrimps because this sector was saturated. This would be the last factory, BK-14, so we'd have to also process frogs' legs. Everything was arranged, but the Danish supplier suddenly objected. They wanted another ten lakh taka to supply us with their machinery. I informed Salauddin Shaheb at BKB and asked if we could look for another supplier. He said, "That's not possible because we'd need to evaluate the project again. The project was passed based on this supplier. Accept their demand. I'll get your loan passed." I almost begged the supplier, "Don't you have any faith?"

"What does faith have to do with this? This is your BKB's demand. A few of the top officials will get this money."

He refused to tell me the names of those officials. I increased the amount to ten lakhs and the project was passed. The total cost for this project eventually came to 87 lakh taka. I strongly believed that had I done this on my own, I could have done it with 47 lakhs.

Khaleque Shaheb checked out the land and then I went. A boatman by the name of Bilayet and his dinghy awaited us by the Rupsha River. Khaleque Shaheb and Hasan were there with me. Bilayet's son, Masud, was there too. When we got on the dinghy, the boatman said, "Sir, lie down. It will take a while as I have to row against the tide."

It took us forty minutes to get across. We inspected the land and I said to Khaleque Shaheb, "Isn't it a little too far?"

He said, "Where else will you get land for just ten thousand taka?"

Lutfor measured the land and in the afternoon, he made a brick kiln and cooked us lunch.

Again, we got on the boat. This time, we rode with the tide. Our fates are just like the tides of a river – some have high tides, some low. And then there were some who went against the tide. We reached the opposite bank from where we took a rickshaw we came to stand in from of Picture Palace. We had watched many a movie at this theater. After changing my wet undershirt in front of everyone, we got on a bus to Jessore. Hasan stayed behind while Khaleque Shaheb and I returned to Dhaka the next morning.

We began work earnestly on the seafood processing plant at that location, but the problem was with the thieves and robbers. People say that no policeman had ever gone into Jabusa village. It was a large village and, apparently, even during the British period, no policeman had entered it. All the dacoits took refuge there. No one wanted to stay the night at site for fear of them and it grew increasingly difficult to continue working.

I decided to go there myself. The Jabusa village Chairman and the Imam of the mosque were one and the same. He was also the headmaster of the village school. I sent someone to escort him to my location where I treated him to lunch. After eating, I took him for a walk a little distance away from the others and said, "Master Shaheb, if anyone ever again goes near my factory or threatens anyone from there or demands anything, then I will hang a brick from your thing, strip you, and make you stand facing the sun. My name is Colonel Shahid!"

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he whimpered, "No…no."

Then I handed him ten thousand taka – for village development. I said, "If necessary, I will give more from time to time. But you cannot come here. You have to send someone." From that day to this, there were no more incidents. The plant was completed without any further hassle.

Now I needed some working capital. That was another department where a very weird-looking man worked. I had never seen a man like him. The file got stuck with him. According to their calculations, Gemini Seafood would need two crores sixty lakh taka as working capital, but they would give just eighty lakhs initially so that I could gain some experience. If I proved successful, the loan amount could be increased. I fought with them. Then I need electricity. PDB, Khulna, knew everything, and they had even had the project passed. There was just one problem – I had to give them two and a half lakh taka as "speed money." I decided that I would not give it. Khaleque Shaheb said, "What can we do? If the money must indeed be given, let me see what I can do." He negotiated with them and brought the amount down a lot. Electricity was supplied. Now I really needed the working capital. The bank said I would need to repay the 37 lakhs with the accumulated interest before they give me any more money.

I cursed them. I shouted, "If I had the 37 lakhs, why would I come to you idiots? My factory could have been built with that money but to satisfy your demands, my costs went up to 87 lakh. Finally, after several days of negotiation, I was able to get them to lend me 5% working capital. That amount, however, was supposed to be 2.6 crores, but I only got 90 lakhs – underfinanced, in other words. I was in trouble. It took me 10 years to recover from that trouble. Gemini Seafood is now running well and is able to give good amounts of dividend.

Chapter Thirty-five

SPC Pole, Gemcon, Ltd.

Brigadier Kader called me one day to ask if I could meet with Brigadier Munim. So I made an appointment with Brigadier Munim and went to see him. After exchanging pleasantries, Brigadier Munim asked whether I knew anything about SPC poles.

I said, “I never even heard that name.”

He explained, “It’s a concrete electric pole. It is made by inserting high tensile wire into concrete and pushing them together with a machine. It is twisted in the process, so it is known as ‘spun’. So this pole is called Spun Prestressed Concrete pole or SPC, in short. These poles were used for the electrification of the whole of Germany. It’s also used in many other countries like China, Taiwan, Thailand, Phillipines, Indonesia, Iraq, and Iran.”

Brigadier Munim also said, “Two SPC pole factories are being established, one by PDB, Chittagong, and the other, funded by the ADB, in Aricha. When those factories begin production, no other poles will be used. But we need to build a factory in North Bengal for electrification in that region.”

He proposed that I be the one to set up that factory. Naturally, I asked, “Why me, sir?”

He replied, “No one wants to go to North Bengal. But we do need electrification there. You have some experience in working there, so I thought you’d be the right choice.”

I said, “Forget me, sir. I’m just a small-time contractor. Not a very significant person, either. I can’t afford to make such a huge investment.”

He said, “You can borrow money from the bank.”

“But I don’t even know what that thing is.”

Brigadier Munim laughed. Then he said, “Go and find out. Go to Canada, Germany, Thailand, or Manila. I’ll give you the contacts. Read books and brochures.”

I couldn’t refuse completely. I said, “Give me some books and brochures. Let me see them first.”

I brought the books home and studied them carefully. I tried to understand as much as possible. Then I went back to Brigadier Munim to discuss the work. I got a Letter of Intent from him and a letter to aid me in going abroad. He gave me the address of a company in Germany and one in Thailand. I’d visit these two places for now.

First, I went to Germany. The machinery in Germany was quite heavy-duty and would last many years, but the price was steep. Then I went to Thailand before returning to Dhaka.

I needed money. I went to the General Manager of ICB, Sikander Ali. He said, “Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha will take care of it.” He called the bank for me. But I can’t begin to describe how long it took or how much effort I had to put in to get this project approved.

Now I need to go to North Bengal. When I had constructed the firing range in Bogra, I had bought the sand and stones from Bhajanpur in Panchagarh. Hasan and Fulmiya had gone then, so this time too, I sent

Hasan with Ashraf to Panchagarh to scope out the area and settle on a place. Later, I flew in to Syedpur with Alamgir Shaheb to join them. From Syedpur, we had to take a bus, so we waited at a teastall in the town. The bus would arrive in an hour and a half or two. Many Biharis still lived in Syedpur. Around noon, we had a lunch of mutton and bread at a Bihari shop. Finally, around 12.30 pm, a dilapidated bus rattled in and the four of us boarded.

Ashraf informed us that the bus would take us only up to Thakurgaon. At five or six pm, a bus would roll in from Dinajpur. If there were enough passengers, or if the bus driver desired, that bus would go to Panchagarh. If these conditions were not met, we would have wait till the following day.

We reached Thakurgaon around five-thirty, the bus stopping innumerable times to pick up and drop off passengers. After we got off, we sat at a roadside stall to have tea and shingara. Our next bus arrived at six from Dinajpur. Some passengers had gathered to take it and so we bought our tickets too. Gradually, our confidence rose – the bus would go to Panchgarh that day. The bus started off and though it was a winter night, it stopped several times to pick up and drop off passengers. We reached Panchagarh at ten-thirty that night. We had made arrangements to stay at a resthouse belonging to the Roads and Highways Department. We took a rickshaw, but on the way, we had to cross a 300-foot Bailey bridge. We got off the rickshaw and helped to push it up onto the bridge which began to sway and rock, as if it would break any moment. That was quite an experience!

There was no one on the streets as it was so late. Lights twinkled here and there in the deep darkness of the night. We couldn't make anything out in the dark. Finally, we found the resthouse, but there was no one there. Ashraf spent some time yelling for someone but there was no one to answer his call. Now Ashraf climbed a ladder and, facing the bazaar, he began to shout, "You bastard, Pahar Ali, where the hell are you?"

It sounded like someone named Pahar Ali was supposed to meet us here. Soon, we heard footsteps approaching. Pahar Ali came forward and lighted the lantern. There was water on the veranda to wash but it was quite cold. We had to make do with that for now. Then we sat down to eat. We were served about forty parathas and 2 or 3 kg of mutton cooked with plenty of spices. Since a colonel was going to eat this food, the son of a tiger – so the amount had been served accordingly. I asked, "Ashraf, how many people did your Pahar Ali cook for?" He said, "Sir, please eat. You'll be here for two days and this is all you'll get. The weather is cold here, so the food lasts seven days."

I was relieved to know that we wouldn't run short of food here. We each ate one paratha and finished our meal.

It was late. On top of that, the peculiar journeys of the day were taking their toll. We washed up, changed, and dimming the lanterns, we went to bed. Ashraf went off to the local Chairman, Shome Ali's house where he'd be staying.

The next morning, we washed our faces and hands – taking a cold bath in this freezing weather was impossible. We took a rickshaw across that bridge again and went towards the right, in the opposite direction from Thakurgaon. After about a mile, we turned left. To our left was the border of Mirgarh. Later, we went to see an Indian tea garden. There was a BDR post there. If we travelled further to the left,

we'd see Mirza Golam Hafiz's home. I also learned much later that Brigadier Jahed Latif's home was here too.

As we went a little further on, I realized that trains plied this area. We went past the station and got off the rickshaw when we arrived at our destination. The first thing I saw was a tree. Perhaps it had been a mango tree at first, but a banyan tree, leaning against it, had spread all over it. There were still signs that it was a mango tree but the banyan prevailed. Our country was like this mango tree. Even if it was a problem, there would be democracy. So it happened – twice – but both times, they became the banyan trees and the mango tree was displaced.

Electric lines traversed the air above our heads. Ashraf said, "These are 11 KVA lines going into Thakurgaon. There is no connection from here to Panchagarh, which has received no electricity. Panchagarh is just a police station. He showed us the train line and the station. Trains carried sand and gravel from here to different locations. Bhajanpur was sixteen miles from the station. Gravel and sand could be found anywhere but Bhajanpur was like a warehouse. Ashraf showed us the land – it was low-lying land and needed to be levelled.

Ashraf said, "There used to be five forts here. That's why this place is called Panchagarh. The forts don't exist any more but their remains are still here. The roads were unpaved during the reign of the kings but during Ayub Khan's regime, they were paved. The mango and jackfruit trees were planted by the king and you can still see some of them along the unpaved roads."

He pointed out the mango and jackfruit trees saying, "We can make our living quarters and office under those trees. I will install a tubewell too."

I asked, "Can we get water?"

"Oh yes, sir. There is an unlimited supply of water – the river is close by."

"Make a bathroom too."

"No need, sir," Ashraf said. "Everyone can bathe at the tubewell. Just a toilet will be enough."

"Good," I said. "I'll come and stay here too."

Ashraf laughed when I said this, but later on, I did stay in that hut under the banyan tree twice every month for a year. There was nowhere else to stay. I remembered the time I had sent Ashraf and Hasan to find land. Hasan had reported his dire experiences here but I found that the situation was a hundred times better.

Hasan and the rest stayed at a hotel that had no name. The beds were placed side by side. The boarders were called passengers. When they went to bed, their wallets, watches, and clothes were locked in a big box so that no one could steal the others' belongings. Food was served only at lunchtime at Al Italia Hotel and Restaurant, three walls of which were made of thinly sliced bamboo and one side was open. No meals were seved at night because there were no customers. Hasan had slimmed down quite a bit when he returned after a month, but Ashraf remained the same.

The rickshaw was waiting for us, so we got back on. Lunch would be at the resthouse. Pahar Ali had cooked a curry of local chicken, daal, and spiced mashed potato (or alu bhorta) to be eaten with rice. I

went out after hearing the menu. I had to see the marketplace, the cinema hall. When a movie was played, the songs and the dialogues along with the noise from the generator could be heard all over the bazaar. Only the dances stayed under wraps.

All the shops in the market were shanties. Some had tin roofs. There was a branch each of Sonali Bank and Agrani Bank. It was a sub-sub district and like any other such town, there were some offices along the other side of the raod. There was also a prison. I walked around, also getting some exercise in the process. I also took a walk along the riverside. The Korotoa was an incredibly beautiful river. It swelled up during the monsoon, especially as India opened its barrage gates from the other side. And in the winter, it dried up to a stream. Locals would dig the river during the winter and collect the roots of trees found there. There were one or two boats on the river which were used for fishing. Meat was not very popular here. Apparently, only one or two cows and a few goats would be slaughtered at a time in the whole of Panchagarh. They ate mostly vegetables, spices, linseed oil, sesame oil, mustard oil, and the like. The people here suffered from a severe iodine deficiency. The government, though, had been supplying iodized salt now. The other problem with this area was there was no income or savings. The land yielded no crops nor did they know how to farm the land. Many even died in Monga. Apparently, some people had comein from Mymensingh, bought some land on the other side of the river, and farmed it successfully. Some of their produce was brought here. The rest of the food source was their backyard gardens. They had some livestock – small, skinny cows, small goats, and some chickens. Yet, the land around their homes was high. It was possible to farm this land, good especially for vegetables and fruit trees. I walked around observing everything and became late for lunch.

After lunch, I sat down with Alamgir Shaheb to discuss Gemcon. Later in the day, I went walking in the other direction for a mile or two. Evening was descending as I made my way back and I saw the little oil lamps in the shops lighting up. It reminded me of my childhood. I said to Alamgir Shaheb, “Come, let’s take another walk. This place is incredibly beautiful. Very romantic.”

We walked around the marketplace and returned to have dinner. We went to bed soon after.

Only one bus, which would arrive in the morning, serviced this area. We got on the bus and had to change buses after ten miles. Unfortunately, there were no more seats on the bus that came. So we held on to the rods overhead and remained standing. Most of the passengers were workers at the textile mill about eight miles away. When these passengers got off at their stop, we were finally able to sit.

Syedpur looked like New York City to us now. We took a rickshaw from the bus stand directly to the airport. Ashraf stayed back. He had to take care of the registration of the land. We would have to submit those papers with our project application.

In Dhaka, Alamgir Shaheb set about designing the building, factory, and the roads. The director of this project was Rafiq Shaheb. All he did was supervise – he preferred to use his mouth to do so rather than with a pencil and paper, probably because he was so skinny that he couldn’t even hold a pen to write.

The project was completed one day. Khaleque Shaheb had examined many projects at ICB and done some consultancy as well. He knew many people at the bank. Because of his negotiation, the project was finally accepted by BSRS. There was an engineer named Salauddin at BSRS – formerly from the Lahore

Engineering College – who helped a lot to establish this project. But it is not possible to describe what the BSRS did about the project. ICB's General Manager, Sikander Shaheb, was a great help too.

Work began in Panchagarh. Hasan, Reza, Faruk, and Munir looked after things. I had even found an engineer, but he left after handing over his job to Mukhles. Deb, a diploma engineer, who worked with us in Jessore, also came on board. A local engineer, Toufik, joined in, and Kamal from Vantage, sent me an engineer named Mizan.

Progress was stop and go, because it was very difficult to get funds out of BSRS. Every so often, inspectors from BSRS would come to guage the progress. They would take measurements and what not to make and submit reports. Only then would we get the next installment. This all took two years until finally, Gemcon was established. There was a residential building with a pond. The water in the pond was blue and the level rose and fell with the river. Next to this, I constructed a straw hut with bamboo poles and no walls. We called it the "Lazy Room" where we would sip tea. We also decided to try farming fish in the pond.

After taking care of all this, we notified the Germans. A German named Kretschmar appeared here one day. We took him to Panchagarh to see the plant. He inspected the place. He saw the batching and mixture machines, the boiler from India, as well as the machinery given by them: the thread oil machine, prestressed machine, and the laboratory.

Kretschmar first drew a chalk circle and placed everything in it. No one would enter that circle nor would they touch anything. He would only hand over the items one by one after full knowledge of how to handle them was gained. He turned on the machines himself first and demonstrated its use to us. Then he told our men to turn it on. Within a month and a half, a single man, working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, was able to establish the entire project for us. Of course, he was supported by our engineer, diploma engineer as well as two or four othes. Engineer Mukhles had arrived in Panchagarh by this time. He also became fully trained. I was constantly on the go. The men were informed that pole production would begin within a couple of days and I went to observe. The advantage of the German machines was that they ran both on electricity and hydraulic power, and could be run on either or both sources. This helped make the spinning balanced and the surface smooth, which wasn't possible with any other machine. So they lasted longer, but the price also increased.

The much-awaited pole production day arrived. We all went to stand by the machines. Kretschmar mounted the mould, turned the spinning plant and made a pole. Then he did the steaming. With a flexible piple, he inserted the boiler steam into it. As the concrete spun around in the mould, it grew thicker like cream until it solidified. The center remained empty. When he took it out and showed us, it looked like the barrel of a rifle – that's how smooth it was. My heart filled with satisfaction. We planted the first pole in front of our office and mounted the national flag on it. The flag still flies proudly on that pole to this day. The news spread all over Panchagarh.

My favorite was the "batching mixing plant." As it ran electronically, it made its own measurements. Data needed to be fed on how much stone, cement, water, and sand was needed. According to the data, the machine selected the items and mixed them. There was no room for error. Kretschmar observed our engineers and diploma engineers for a few more days to make sure they were able to handle the process well; then, exactly two months later, he returned to his own country. Since there was no church in Panchagarh, Kretschmar used to go to a run-down mosque in the marketplace to pray. The locals never

questioned why a white man from a different religion should enter a mosque. Rather, on the contrary, they were quite happy, perhaps more so, because the people of Panchagarh are very simple and kind-hearted. Unfortunately, when some of them became embroiled in politics, their nature changed for the worse. However, even those who were involved in politics at that time were also quite simple and nice. Neither Hafiz Shaheb nor Sarker Shaheb created any problems for us. Even though they didn't do much for Panchagarh, at least they didn't dishonor the place.

Some local young men and women joined Gemcon. The women's work included breaking the stones, sorting them, gathering them, separating the stones and the sand, gathering the sand, and other such jobs.

I gave instructions to use five moulds to produce five poles simultaneously. "Stop when you have two hundred," I said. "Customers will come to see them and we should be able to show them. We should also be able to immediately supply to PDB when they want them."

I went to the PDB. Brigadier Kashem was PDB's new Chairman while Brigadier Munim had been promoted to General and was now the Commerce Minister. Brigadier Kashem listened to the history and looked at the letter from the PDB. Then he called in the Director over the intercom and, in a tone of chastisement, said, "You couldn't manage to build a factory in Chittagong or Aricha, and look at Colonel Shahid in the private sector! He has built a factory with German machinery in a remote area like Panchagarh."

To me, he said, "You may go now. We'll have a chat some other day."

Accordingly, I tried to get an appointment with him, but there was none to be had. After several tries, I succeeded in getting a time. When I went there, Kashem Shaheb said that they were broke and there was no project currently running. So they wouldn't be buying any poles at the moment.

I felt as if the sky had fallen on my head – the interest on the loan from BSRS was rising. Whatever I had accumulated from Gemini Seafood and my construction business had been poured into this project. No was not an answer I needed right now. I talked to many people but nothing came of it. This pole factory did not matter to anyone in the government or those who worked for it because whether there was work or not, they received their salary at the end of the month. Besides, they apparently had other sources of income these days, including bribes, although it was all hush-hush. It wasn't very well-known. As far as I knew, there were four directors of whom two were absolute angels! One was Bashar Shaheb, the other, Mahmud Shaheb. But that wouldn't solve my problem. So I went to General Munim who was rather saddened when he heard my story.

The Energy Minister, Anwar Hossain Manju, called me one day to meet with him. So I went to his office. Apparently, there was a story in the weekly *Bichitra* about an oil gas company which he was reading intently. I spoke about my problem, and he kept reading. At intervals, he said, "What is it, Shahid Bhai?" When the conversation was over, he said there was no money and that they wouldn't be buying the poles.

Everyone knew me – Brigadier Kashem, Anwar Hossain Manju – but nothing mattered. I don't understand that the strings were being pulled from elsewhere. How was I supposed to know that Ershad was behind this? There was no reason to. People said Ershad was a good man and we didn't even know each other that well. All I knew was that Ershad and his army had taken control, which I disliked very much. And I had only met him a long time ago in Rangpur. Everyone pandered to him. I didn't. So what if everyone

went to him? Why should I? Finally, I had to lay off some people in Panchagarh. It's difficult to let go of trained employees – especially as the Germans had come here to train them. Some of them, though, decided to stay on at half their salary, but even that was difficult for me to manage. So they started rearing chickens and cows at the factory. I had two trucks to carry the sand and gravel. I rented these out and earned some money to pay some of the salaries. And on the other end, the bank's loan was growing mountain-high.

Sometime now, I learned that the PDB was getting some foreign investment. Funded by the Asian Development Bank, electrification of some towns would be done with the ADB handling the consultancy.

The ADB consultant was an engineer from New Zealand. I went to him with my story. He listened to me thoughtfully and said, "Don't worry about a thing. Submit the tender. I'll see to it." I mentioned that the government may not want to hire me and he said, "We have no connection to the government."

The tender was given in three parts. I would submit a tender from North Bengal, more than that not being possible. But no bank would act as guarantor. Faruk Shaheb used to sell the fish from Gemini Seafood. I said to him, "Bhai, save me." He asked what he could do. I said, "I need three lakh taka in cash." The next day, he came in, and from under his shirt, he poured a bundle of money onto my table. I showed them that money too but still no bank would agree to back me. I went desperately to ICB's Managing Director, Sikander Shaheb. After hearing of my plight, he called a couple of people but realized that this wouldn't work. Then he said, "The ICB does not provide guarantees, but you're giving us cash, so I will provide it. ICB does have a responsibility and I am upholding that. IF there are questions, I will answer." And he provided me with the bank guarantee. He was definitely a brave man!

I submitted the tender and won the project. I manufactured five thousand poles and supplied them. Unfortunately, I could not manage to manufacture the mould locally. I went to the port, the Narayanganj dockyard, Bitach, but no one could help. So I imported thirty moulds from Korea at half-price. Panchagarh began to develop and two more towns were supplied with electricity, and then 14, and 16. I submitted tenders for these and got the work. Gemcon was, thus, successfully established, but there was no guarantee of work.

When the situation in the government changed in '91, my situation remained the same. Gemcon had no work, so I concentrated on my other projects. I worked on Welldreil, on the hydrocarbon habitats studies, the work over, some construction, on the gas pipeline. Gemini Seafood would run and stop alternatively. I was limping along. The pole business, however, grew worse by the day.

Finally, at my wits' end, I laid an SPC pole each in front of the offices of General Munim, Minister Anwar Hossain, the 14 towns, the 18 towns, and the Energy building at the Secretariat.

I went to see Sikander Shaheb again at BSRS. He took me to see the Energy Secretary, Faizur Rajjak Shaheb, the next day. Faizur Shaheb said, "Funds are stuck at the bank. Projects have to be given to Kazi Shahid. The poles must be bought. Profit must be made so that the bank loan can be paid by establishing more industries."

Faizur Rajjak Shaheb knew how to organize his thoughts and he understood the ways of the current times. He was a competent and honest officer. He declared clearly that I needed to talk to someone at a higher level. This was not within the scope of a Secretary because the poles would now be bought by the REB.

PDB would buy a few, Barendra would take another few, but if I wanted to run my industry, I needed to go to REB. Then he advised me to write a letter to the Energy Minister. After leaving his office, Sikander Shaheb said, "What will the Energy Minister do alone? We have to involve the Industry, Finance, Commerce ministries as well." We arrived at his office and he got out. Then he said, "Write to the Prime Minister." He advised me alright, but the Prime Minister was now Begum Khaleda Zia. How could I write to her? How would I even get it into her hands? And, of course, then, what would she do?

I looked around and found a Colonel student of mine. I explained everything to him and he said, "Sir, put everything together into a two or three hundred page document and write to her. Let me try and get it to her desk. I have no idea what will happen after that though."

The letter was prepared and I handed it to the Colonel. In addition, I had a copy of the cover letter sent to the Industry, Finance ministries, and other places. Later on, I heard – didn't see – that the Prime Minister had signed and written something on the cover letter, and forwarded it to the Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman Shaheb. I have no idea why, but Saifur Rahman Shaheb, two other ministers, Secretary, his secretary, REB, PDB, DESA, all sat together with my documents. In his own dialect, he said, "Local product, good product, we must take it."

And that was it! Take it, he said, but who would take it? REB was not to be messed with. One chairman went, another one came, but nothing was happening for me. Halim Shaheb said, "I'm running REB by photocopying with the foreigner's money. It is their pole, their money. I can't handle your problems with all this."

Later, Mowla Bhai told me the same thing and so did Jahid Latif, although the latter did give me an idea, "Plant trees in that area where your factory is. Then when they're grown, make wooden poles and sell them with Gemcon's name."

A meeting was held at the Secretary Energy's office. REB, PDB, the director-member was present with DESA chairman. I was asked to present my case. I waxed eloquent on the advantages of the SPC or electric poles. I said, "They are good for the environment. They don't have either oxide or arsenic or coal tar. It is made by spinning, so they are round and tapered. Also, the spinning makes them 100% waterproof. So they will last a hundred years. They will not rust or break or fall in a storm."

One of the REB members laughed after he heard my description, "So many qualities!" I shut him up chastisingly. Finally, Faizur Rajjak Shaheb said, "REB will evaluate before taking them."

This evaluation took them one year. I had to install poles for one mile, take them out, roll them around, toss them in the water, take them across the field to show them. The decision was made to write a letter. I even received that letter one day. The price on it was that of wooden poles. The BNP government went and the Awami League took over. The demand for energy rose, the MPs' demands increased, and the REB's activities heightened. Wooden poles were used for a time but then they had to be removed. It was to me that REB now turned for a supply of poles because no one else came forward. More factories were needed to make poles because the tax holiday that the Gemcon factory enjoyed had ended. So, if I wanted a bank loan or a tax holiday, I needed to construct another factory in another location. So I built one in Khulna, then another one in Panchagarh. I built a second one in the Khulna area and my work continued.

Mukhles had gained much experience while working for me. He knew pretty much everything by now. The Awami League government, towards the end of their regime, took out the experience clause because others could not enter the market due to the clause. When Mukhles learned that having a factory now was the only criteria to bid for jobs, he took the opportunity and left me to build his own factory. Several others like him joined in, the most popular item for production being poles. During the Awami League regime, they got a chance to make deals with REB for poles. Mukhles not only got his foot in there, he also did consultancy, going as far as distributing my proprietary know how.

Well, if one is successful, everyone takes notice. Good people compliment and praise. Others suffer from jealousy and spread rumors. My business life overcame many obstacles and continued to move forward.

In the eighties, when poles had just come into production, Ameenah and I went on a Europe trip with our boys after the matriculation exams. We were on our way to Interlaken in Switzerland on a train. Inam and Nabil sat on one side while the rest of us sat on the other. Nabil was scolding Inam for not sitting properly. I looked at them to see Inam sitting on the bench with his feet tucked in underneath and staring at Nabil. Nabil complained, "Abbu, tell Inam to be normal."

I said, "Inam, sit normally."

The children's mischief, their laughter helped to reduce my mental stress. If children receive attention and love, they will learn to love their elders too. They will become good citizens, the ones who can help to develop the country.

After sightseeing through Europe, we came to Geneva. From here, we'd take a train to Italy. We were waiting for the train at the station very early in the morning. Anis had gone to the restroom. A train rumbled in and then out. It had rolled in on the opposite side from where we were waiting. We kept sitting there but Anis didn't come. So I went looking for him in the washroom but he was nowhere to be found.

I came back and informed the station manager, "I've lost one of my sons." Instantly, they sent messages to the other stations with his height and age, that he was from the Indian sub-continent, and that he was lost.

We had gone cold with worry. I didn't think for a moment that such a thing could happen to us on foreign soil. We sat there, with hearts fluttering. A little later, we were informed that a child had been found in the next station. The boy had himself said that he had got on the wrong train. So they sent him back on the next train. The train came, and with it came Anis. We were so deeply relieved. We were supposed to go on this train so we boarded.

I asked Anis, "Were you scared?"

He said, "I was thinking what if you left?"

I said, "How could we do that, Baba? Do parents ever leave you? No, they don't. We would have sat here no matter how many days it took to find you."

Nabil's and Anis's SSC exam results were out and they'd both done very well. They were to be admitted into Notre Dame College. So we couldn't travel on to America. Instead, we returned home. From Italy, we took a direct train to London. The journey took a whole day and night by train. Immigration was

completed on the train, which did not stop anywhere, and nor did we have to get off somewhere. We crossed one country after another. Inam did not want to return home. He was determined to go to America. In ’81, Inam’s younger maternal aunty, Ameerah Huq got married. We were in America at the time and Inam was six months old. Then, every time after that when his mother travelled to the States, she had gone alone. He hadn’t gone with her. This was the reason for his determination to see the United States.

We managed to persuade Inam to return to Bangladesh. I knew he was hurt. Apparently he wanted to know which America it was that his mother visited. I gave him my word that we would soon plan another trip there.

Nabil and Anis were admitted into Notre Dame College to study in the Science group. I don’t normally interfere in these things – their study, their decision was my motto. They talk about these things with their mother. During their life at Notre Dame, Nabil got involved with sports and Anis with debating. In other words, Anis read a lot and wrote too. They decided for themselves where they would go to school after their Intermediate results. All I knew was that they had applied to several universities in the US. They, however, were both accepted at Brown University in Rhode Island. The only decision I contributed was that they should both go to the same place. Both boys left for their undergraduate study in ’88. Now there was no more question of waking them up to exercise and run with me; no warning to hurry home or not to stay out late; no talking loudly indoors; or that everyone must sit to eat together.

When they left, I told them that we would speak on the phone once a week for twenty minutes, sometimes on the speaker. We scheduled a time and day for this. Twice a week, we would mail two or three weeklies and one or two dailies – one Bangali, one English; and at least one letter from me. They were required to reply to me. Any other communication would happen by phone. They were not to work over there and they would come to Dhaka for their summer and winter vacation.

Four years passed in this manner. Within their first year though, they prepared a budget, which even included when they would have a Coke. They never went outside this budget and never asked for an extra dollar. They led a strictly disciplined life. Their mother, Inam, and I visited once a year. At that time, Rhode Island had only one hotel, the famous Biltmore, where we stayed. We would take them and their friends out for dinner one night and treat them at the hotel on another. We chatted with them about Bangladesh, about independence, and their friends listened in awe.

My sons were growing up, becoming educated and knowledgeable, and increasingly far-sighted and mature.

Chapter Thirty-six

Khoborer Kagoj

Towards the end of 1988, Naimul Islam Khan began to publish a weekly magazine called *Khoborer Kagoj*. He used to give me a copy of the paper which I passed on to Nabil and Anis. They would read the entire paper with glee. Apart from their academic studies, the two brothers had developed a habit of reading other foreign and local books, journals, and magazines. They could distinguish between good and bad papers.

At that time, all the great writers were writing for *Khoborer Kagoj*. Naimul had been able to persuade several good columnists to write for him. He also employed some hardworking young reporters interested in investigative journalism.

Naim requested me to take on the responsibility of publishing the magazine. After giving this some thought, I said to Naim, "I won't just finance this. I want you to be the Editor and I will be the Chief Editor, and the offices of the weekly *Khoborer Kagoj* will be in my office."

And so, the *Weekly Khoborer Kagoj* was re-established at my office/home on the first floor of 13/4. We added a couple more columnists and intellectuals. I sat with everyone to have a discussion – the topic: a policy for the paper.

It had been a desire of mine for a long time to see the words "Father of the Nation," "Bangabandhu," and "Bangalee" in print regularly so that the younger generation could learn. There would be articles on the Muktijuddho and the Muktijoddhas; about the thought-process behind the Muktijuddho. In short, I wanted to reawaken the disconsolate Muktijoddhas, to create a revolution, to rejuvenate the 16th of December.

When I discussed these issues with Naimul Islam Khan, and with Zillur Rahman, Maruf Chinu, Syed Borhan Kabir, Aman-ud-Dowla Aman, Niaz, J E Mamun, and a host of progressive young writers, I found everyone to be very enthusiastic. One by one, columnists Syed Huq, Foyez Ahmed, Farhad Mazhar, Humayun Azad, Imdadul Huq Milon, etc., joined us, and fantastic pieces were written continuously. There was a hint of a revolution in these writings.

We wanted an end to dictatorship. Dictators and dictatorships destroyed a nation's intellect, and they needed to be removed. The question was how far against them should we go? My answer was – 100%. The next question was how extremely could our columnists write? I said, "As much as they can."

I assumed my responsibilities with renewed vigor, even though I knew it would be a loss. But the cultural world that I had entered holding my Abba's hand and the awareness I had gain awoke in me again.

This was a unique opportunity for the columnists to write independently. Soon, quite a number of columnists began contributing to *Khoborer Kagoj*.

There were even columnists who had never written for a magazine. They put pen to paper too, as though *Khoborer Kagoj* was the final destination for all columnists. I made it a rule to pay the columnists and decided that I would write a weekly column about the Liberation War. To this end, I looked for books on the War but could not find a single one.

Zeenat, the book store, said, “Sir, after ’75, we removed all the books. You won’t find a single book. No one calls themselves Muktijoddhas anymore. No one writes about the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu.”

I thought, “Fine. We’ll write.”

Khoborer Kagoj was at the height of its popularity at the time. A few days later, one morning around 10 or 11 o’clock, a Major entered our office. Very respectfully, he told me that the Head of DGIF, Brigadier Nasir Shaheb wanted to have a cup of tea with me in his office. He asked if I could go with him right then.

Can anyone say no when the Head of DGIF calls? I went – to Brigadier Nasir’s office. He stood up and, shaking hands with me, he said, “Sit down, friend!” I sat, and he asked me how I was, how he was, and other such mundane things. He asked if I would have tea and listed the names of the imported teas and biscuits he had to offer. We ate and drank, I thinking that we would chat. But no. Instead, he took out an issue of *Khoborer Kagoj* and placed it on his desk. He had, thus far, been showing a pleasant demeanor, but now, gravely, he asked, “Are you running this?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see what is written inside?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You print whatever you get?”

“Yes, that I do.”

“What about this article? Did you see it?”

“Yes.”

“What a dangerous thing to say! How could you print this?”

“See, friend, when I get the articles, they’re handwritten and don’t seem very threatening. However, after they’re printed and the hawker sells them, I, too, am sometimes taken aback.”

Nasir first stared at me in all seriousness. Then he said, “Oh! So you understand.”

“Of course, I do now. When you called me, there was no time or scope to understand.”

Nasir said, “Listen, Shahid, do you think I’m telling you this of my own accord?”

I didn’t speak. He continued, “Can you not check first? Or maybe not publish one or two of these kinds of articles? No one else does.”

Again, I didn’t respond. He said, “You know, writing against the government cannot be the work of a magazine.”

Fully agreeing with him, I said, “I’ll see to that. But if the government is being run by an illegal entity, then you can expect a little bit of such writing.”

Nasir said, “Oh! So you won’t stop?”

“You can stop me – you have the power.”

He laughed at my words and we had another round of tea and biscuits. In between our chat, he also went inside once or twice. I sat on. He would return and we continued chatting. I have no idea how it became three in the afternoon. Nasir said, “My friend, please do you work with discretion. It’s late now. You should go.”

I returned to the office and saw everyone sitting there with glum faces. Seeing me, they rushed to ask what had happened. Gathering everyone around, I showed them the article that I had been questioned about. I told them there was nothing to worry about. “*Khoborer Kagoj* will continue running the way it has been.”

The question of how we wer supposed to treat issues related to the Awami League and BNP arose, particularly because most of those involved with *Khoborer Kagoj* were leftists. I said, “Critique them equally, and balance it out accordingly.”

But we needed advertisements now. And I had to find them. I talked to many people, some agreed, some didn’t. Latifur Rahman, however, ran ads continuously. It didn’t take long for *Khoborer Kagoj* to become established and the reporters could be paid a little more. I also increased the rate for columnists.

In the meantime, I had noticed a girl coming into the office with Naim. Then one day, he handed me an article and said, “Shahid Bhai, please read this.”

Usually, he would ask me to read an article if it struck him in some way. If I liked it, I would tell him to publish. So I read this article too. But when I did, I realized it was a little different. It had been written by a woman called Taslima Nasreen and this was her first work. I did not say anything for some time. Naim said, “Shahid Bhai, it’d be better if we didn’t publish this.”

Today, I feel that Naim was right then, but that day, I said, “Print it.” After that article was published, the era of Taslima Nasreen began. Her articles began to come in every week and get published. Gradually, her infamous articles accumulated and were later collected and published as “Selected Columns” (*Nirbachito Column*). Naim and Taslima Nasreen came to give me a copy of the book one day. I don’t think I noticed that she had acknowledged *Khoborer Kagoj* anywhere in the book.

Then came the different chapters – Naim’s marriage to Taslima, their divorce, the rally with sticks and *fatwa* by the fundamentalists against Taslima, her fleeing the country and publication of her book, her international “fame” – that we all witnessed, some more than others.

Every month, during the first days of the publication of *Khoborer Kagoj*, I spent at least one or two days with the Head of DGIF, Brigadier Nasir, having tea and biscuits – with the same conversation. One day, while I was in his office, a phone call came. Nasir turned on the speaker phone and I clearly heard General Ershad’s voice on the other end.

Ershad asked, “Nasir, what’s happening?”

“Sir, I’ve apprehended him.”

“What are you doing with him?”

“Serious investigation.”

Nasir raised a finger to his lips, signaling me to be quiet in case I burst out laughing.

Ershad: “Nasir, destroy him.”

“Sir, I will definitely do something about him today.”

After hanging up, Nasir said, “Look, my friend, you see what pressure I’m under? Just give it a break for two or three months.”

I beat about the bush, saying I’d see, I’m looking into it, I’ll stop, I’ll think about it, and so on. I would be dismissed around three or four in the afternoon. My office had also figured out the situation. Whatever the DGIF thought they could do wouldn’t be happening with Colonel Shahid.

I had also reassured Ameenah, “Don’t worry. Nasir is there, so there’s nothing to worry about. And what would they even do?” I had had a discussion about the situation with my sons and their mother. I warned them that I may be arrested, or even killed. Many have given their lives because of their writings or beliefs. They listened to me gravely, but neither my sons nor my wife asked me to stop.

The circulation of *Khoborer Kagoj* went up to fifty or sixty thousand. Not bad! The only thing was that if the circulation was high, production costs rose and ads were needed as the price of the magazine wasn’t much.

Professor Humayun Azad wrote an article for *Khoborer Kagoj*, implicating the CSP. The very next day I received a phone call: “I’m Secretary So-and-so.” Probably his name started with an H.

He said, “Is this *Khoborer Kagoj*?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have Humayun Azad’s phone number?”

“Are you referring to Dr. Humayun Azad?”

“No. I’m talking about that bastard, motherfucker Humayun Azad.”

What could I say to that? This Secretary later wrote many articles for *Khoborer Kagoj*. He is now an intellectual. But his words that day made me realize that when egos are hurt, everyone’s mask falls off.

Young reporters were very enthusiastic about *Khoborer Kagoj*. As the days of Ershad’s downfall drew closer, the pens of the *Khoborer Kagoj* contributors seemed to write more forcefully. People were even fighting over the magazine. So many people wrote so many types of articles for it. By then, no one wanted Ershad in political power. His position began to grow weaker.

I received a summons one day from the Home Minister, General Mahmudul Hasan. I went to him and was asked to sit. I was never on good terms with him; neither was it likely to become so even though we had been at Chak Daulat Concentration Camp together in Pakistan. But we had never spoken. He sat me down with great hospitality. In the meantime, tea was served in a fancy cup, along with biscuits. As we ate, he asked what I was doing these days. I said I was in the construction business, had a shrimp factory, a pole factory, and had some oil-gas projects. That’s how I was surviving.

He asked if I wanted anything more and what would be good for me. He asked me all this like a great well-wisher.

I said, “I don’t need anything else. I’m doing fine right now.”

He asked, “How’s the newspaper going?”

I replied, “It’s not a newspaper. It’s a weekly. And it’s going well.”

As we talked, his red telephone rang. I’m not sure how he managed to take the call from another room. He returned soon enough and said, “Shahid, I can’t speak to you anymore today. I’ve been summoned and I have to go right now. I will call you another day.”

A few days after this, a General from the Core of Engineers called me and said, “Shahid, *Khoborer Kagoj* will ruin you.”

“Why? Is there a problem?”

“Well, Ershad Shaheb called five of us – Nuruddin, Halim, Mahbub, Mahmudul Hasan, and Nasir. All five are from the Core of Engineers. At one point, he asked why we were not able to stop you. Halim quickly asked if he wanted us to kill you. Ershad Shaheb asked when he had ever said such a thing and if that was his meaning. He said, ‘Don’t you even understand my words?’ Halim is a clever man. He said something so outrageous that it was difficult to say much after that.”

General Shaheb stopped talking at this point. Then, after a brief pause, he said, “Shahid, just be a little more careful.”

Chapter Thirty-seven

"The Exultant Dance of the Dishonest"

Just when the threats or bribes to me from different sources were increasing daily according to Ershad's instructions, an article by Matiur Rahman Choudhury was published in *Khoborer Kagoj*. It was titled "The Exultant Dance of the Dishonest."

For the younger generation, I am quoting some part of that article here.

> "A day will come when the ignorant will give out absurd orders and rule the country. The unintelligent will be proud of their stupidity. Intellectuals will regret their knowledge. The dishonest will dance exultantly because of their deceitfulness." So prophesied Sheikh Sadi. He, of course, didn't specify a time when this would come to pass. We are being faced with situations like this daily and we can find echoes of these words. So, then, has Sheikh Sadi's "day" come?
>
> Who is leading the country? We are receiving news of irrational orders being passed through which the country is being ruled. I'm not sure if ignorant is the right word to describe them, but they are playing games with the public. They are issuing such orders that it is not possible for the public to disobey. They don't fear the public. They don't want to maintain a relationship with the public. Sometimes they put on an act for the public and say "My power lies with the public." But in reality, they do not support the common people. They believe they are all-knowing. They tell the common people that when they say something, it must be obeyed. They are not public servants – they want the public to be their servants. They don't abide by the law. They don't abide by the Constitution. They run the country on their whims.
>
> This is going on in different countries. Those who are not supposed to be in power or whose job responsibility does not include ruling a country, take control by force and say, "The country cannot go on this way. From today, it will run as I say." Political scientists sometimes identify them as mad but they do not care. They dismiss the political scientists and publicly call them ignorant. They issue a statement that political scientists are not qualified to run a country. They say that political scientists are the root cause of the country's problems. They should be removed from society. But when, in a few days, the country cannot smoothly with them, the political scientists are called back and appointed as advisers. Economists are dismissed and clearly labelled as ignorant about the country's economy. I understand everything. I may have simply marched left and right, but I don't need to read big books to know everything. I understand diplomacy. Critics say I believe in general diplomacy. That is completely untrue. I am an expert in all kinds of diplomacy. There is pleasure in taking a decision and rescinding it. How many in the world can change their minds about a decision? I do not make a decision based on discussion. I believe that no one can ever know more than me. I make a decision for the natural death of the Foreign Ministry. That is how I operate. I do not think at all about what other may think or say. To me, the state and the people are commodities. I put them up for auction when the time is right. When other state heads call me, I stand up and pander to them. I do not have a Harvard background, but even the British ask how I learned such good English.

> I believe that everyone, except me, is a fool. So year after year, I treat them as fools. They do not disobey. In fact, they are proud. They say we are proud to have a son like this, without whom the state would be at a loss. They even call me the friend of the villagers. I live in the city. In an air-conditioned home. Sometimes, I ride a helicopter into those villages. I cry at their sorrows. I return and say that these idiots won't let me live in peace. They always have one problem or the other – either it's their water, or some disease, or hunger. Tell me how much more can I bear? I cannot take this any more. I have to think of my own comfort too. People criticize me for no reason. I only indulge myself sometimes despite so much work and they can't even stand that. They gossip about me but do not say anything in public. I call them fools!

By late afternoon, I heard that Ershad Shaheb was about to ban *Khoborer Kagoj*. I called a couple of people but the reports were not encouraging. Naim was a quick thinker. He appeared with the proprietor of *Laboni* and two copies of the magazine. He said that if *Khoborer Kagoj* was banned, we would take over *Laboni* with a statement about the banning of *Khoborer Kagoj*. *Laboni* would be written in smaller font than *Khoborer Kagoj*. So we needed to buy *Laboni* for fifty thousand taka. So I bought *Laboni*.

Borhan Kabir, Aman-Ud-Dowla, and a few others were on my side. They called and told me that if *Khoborer Kagoj* was banned, Barrister Amirul Islam, Dr. Kamal Hossain, and Barrister Ishtiaque Ahmed were all ready to submit a writ petition to the high court. We also had a discussion in this regard. Phone calls came pouring in from the columnists, writers, intellectuals, politicians and other conscious respected people. They all wanted to know what we were doing or going to do.

Khoborer Kagoj was ultimately banned. Advice poured in more all corners, telling me to write a letter asking for forgiveness. Ershad Shaheb was a vastly forgiving man. Maybe he would forgive me. I couldn't possibly agree to such an idea. A few people at the *Khoborer Kagoj* – they shall remain nameless – also said the same thing.

Borhan and the others were overly enthusiastic. They wanted a decision that very night. Barrister Amirul, Dr. Kamal and Barrister Ishtiaque had already begun proceedings to submit a writ petition to the high court. After the deadline of 10 am passed, they would send a notification to the Home Ministry's Secretary.

In the evening, I finally gave in. I think that notification was sent by telex at 4 am to the Home Ministry. We were all present at the court at ten the next morning. The lawyers were there too. They looked like they hadn't slept all night. The hearing took place that same day in Justice Shahabuddin's court-room, and *Khoborer Kagoj* was released from the clutches of an eclipse. In addition, the state was given a notice with a few stipulations that magazines could not be banned from hereon.

The end was near. 1990 was almost ending but we believed the government wouldn't last the year. Awami League and BNP were at the height of their protest along with Dhaka University. Innumerable students and student leaders, regardless of their political affiliations, came to the *Khoborer Kagoj* office.

On October 25, 1990, the 43rd issue of Volume 9 of *Khoborer Kagoj* was published with the words "Joy Bangla" (Victory to Bengal). The statement made here was that "Joy Bangla" was the slogan of the Bangalis. Any kind of change, modification, correction, or corruption of the slogan would be deemed an unforgivable national crime.

This issue of *Khoborer Kagoj* shook the nation. It even shook the Awami League.

Then came the month of victory, December. Nur Hossen had already been murdered by then. Dr. Milon was killed. Curfew was imposed. But who was going to abide by it? I heard that General Nuruddin had called in all the top officers to ask their opinion. Everyone spoke against Ershad. General Nuruddin conveyed the message to Ershad, who was thunderstruck. The people were pouring into the streets despite the curfew. The roads were crowded. Others decided that they wouldn't publish their papers. What would we do? We printed a few pages the next day with the headline: "A Revolution All Around," but this printing led to some trouble. The hawkers returned three times to collect more copies. But how many more could we print? We heard that the public was aiming their aggression towards the hawkers at not getting copies.

We locked our office for the time being then and went into hiding. In the evening, almost on tiptoe, we gathered again at the office to decide whether we would be publishing the following day. Naim was nowhere to be found. He had left for Comilla. There were only seven or eight of us. Borhan Kabir, Aman-Ud-Dowla, and Chinu were always around, but I couldn't publish a magazine with just these people. Inquiries told us that Ershad's downfall was imminent.

Ershad resigned. Just Shahabuddin became President and formed the caretaker government. A new election would be held.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Ajker Kagoj and Politics

Khoborer Kagoj was making a good profit. There was almost sixteen lakh taka in the bank. The young reporters at the magazine decided that they wanted a daily. I thought about the pros and cons of this idea. I informed Nabil and Anis about the proposed daily which would mean increased costs. I wanted to know what they thought. They said, "Abbu, if you enjoy it, and if you can handle it, do go ahead."

I said, "I have calculated that if I were to publish a daily newspaper, I wouldn't have any money left for our own expenses."

They said, "Do what you think is right."

I also had a discussion with Ameenah. She also said the same thing. So, I told Naim, "Get ready. We're going to publish a daily."

I called Barrister Amirul Islam. He was thrilled when I told him. I said, "Amir Bhai, you can't just be happy. You have to help me out because the declaration for dailies is in the hands of the President."

Amir Bhai asked me to prepare an application addressed to the President and then said, "What are you naming the newspaper?"

"*The Daily Ajker Kagoj*."

I also spoke to Dr. Kamal and Barrister Ishtiaque. I wrote the application and went to Barrister Amir's home the next day. He had also spoken to Dr. Kamal. Borhan Kabir and Aman-Ud-Dowla were waiting at Dr. Kamal's house. We went there immediately. Dr. Kamal took the application and went off to President Shahabuddin. The President wrote a note on my application stating that from now on, all newspaper declarations was being returned to the DC and, according to the regulations, the DC would take the necessary actions. The DC, too, was clever. He sent for me. So I went to his office and within two or three days, I received the newspaper's declaration. But I had to submit other paperwork and needed some verification. Everything went through without a hitch.

Now I needed an office and more reporters. Naim and the others would see to everything. I only asked to have an entire page dedicated to sports. No other paper had done this before, relegating sports news to just a column or two.

Naim said, "We'll need many sports writers and more reporters. We'll also need photo journalists."

I said, "Go ahead."

We even found a space for the office, at the junction of Jhigatola. However, I have forgotten to mention one thing. Before I began publishing the newslpaper, many had asked me to be the Editor. Matiur Rahman Choudhury, for example, had said, "Shahid Bhai, don't make such a big mistake. You're the owner, you'll provide the funds, so you must be the Editor. Manik Mia at *Ittefaq* had made some money, so he was the owner and he himself was the Editor."

Matiur Rahman Choudhury tried very hard to make me the Editor. Still, I remained the Chief Editor and Naimul Islam Khan was appointed as the Editor. We set up the office and bought a computer. A separate

room was arranged for me with a chair and desk. Naim sat there sometimes and, in time, he took over the space. When I went to the office, I sat across from him. There was no longer a separate room for me.

21st February arrived and we published a dummy. The first issue of *Ajker Kagoj* was published on February 23, 1991. Other papers looked at us askance. Some from those papers picked up our paper and laughed. Many said, "Is this really a newspaper? There's no editorial, and the news ends on the very first page. News on the last page ends on the last page. And a whole page for sports? The language is so strange – so colloquial. Not at all formal. Must be the work of some young kids. It will soon shut down."

They were wrong. *Ajker Kagoj* may shut down but it was not due to any of those reasons. Sales of the paper began to soar.

A fantastic article by Borhan Kabir was published in the February 1991 issue of *Ajker Kagoj*. The title was "They Went to Jail for Past Crimes." It was a series. One was about Saifur Rahman, the other about Majedul Huq. Borhan Kabir's main intention was to send a warning to these people through the article. The article wasn't even very long, but neither was it too short. It was published in a box. I didn't see anything to find fault with in the article, but it still caused a huge uproar.

The next evening, shortly after sunset, the police surrounded my house, complete with an arrest warrant. What was wrong? Who had accused me of anything? The OC said, "Saifur Rahman Shaheb has filed a case against you."

I asked, "When?"

The OC replied, "Today. And the arrest warrant was issued today. I received it today and I have been instructed to take you in today."

After Amritsar many years ago, this was my first encounter with the police. So, I was a little taken aback. Barrister Amir was called and he came right away. My youngest son, Inam, was quite offended that the police had come to arrest me. I needed to call my younger brother, Hasan, but Inam wouldn't let me. If Hasan got to know, his sons would find out; and they would tell Inam's friends. Inam would feel so ashamed that he wouldn't be able to face them ever again. I laughed at Inam and hugged him. But he was adamant.

I received news that the *Ajker Kagoj* office had been cordoned off as well. Naim and Borhan were to be arrested too. Borhan had declared that until the next issue was completed, he wouldn't come out.

Naim, on the other hand, had been about to leave his house when the police came and asked, "Does the Editor of *Ajker Kagoj*, Naimul Islam Khan, live here?"

Naim quickly figured out what was going on and said simply, "Yes, he does. Upstairs."

Then leaving them there, he walked calmly to the *Ajker Kagoj* office. Unfortunately, the police were waiting for him here too. By that time, I was in front of the Dhanmondi Police Station OC. Borhan, Naim, and the rest were brought in one by one. The police station was crowded. We started chatting. Mattresses, sheets, and pillows sent from home were spread out on the station floor and we all lay down, while the OC stayed up all night, pacing to and fro.

Barrister Amir arrived in the morning to escort us to court. It took a while but we got bail. This was probably my initiation into the world of courts and cases. There were so many cases against me as time went on. I had to stand in court so many times, but I never laid the blame on any reporter.

Later, Barrister Amir took me to Saifur Rahman's office. After we sat, the newly empowered man spoke with great force in his own special dialect, saying whatever he could.

All I said was, "What you did wasn't appropriate. You are an elderly person, a well-known politician. Is this something anyone should do? This case is similar to when village leaders break each other's heads over land and property."

But, of course, he wasn't willing to listen. He said, "That's not the end of it! There'll be more! A steamroller!"

Silently, I thought, "Ok then – what else is there for me to do?" Aloud, in a gentle voice, I said, "Rahman Bhai, please have the case dismissed. It will be good for you and for us."

He, of course, needed to show his strength and power. But I realized – for the first time – how much politicians fear newspapers. Finally, I got up to leave and so did Barrister Amir.

Later though, Saifur Rahman told Barrister Amir that he would withdraw the case. He had filed the case through his son. Apparently, I had defamed the father-son duo.

Ajker Kagoj was able to bring about a change in the world of daily newspapers and a new trend was established in journalism. The circulation of the paper increased, and we needed to invest more money. Naim, one day, for some reason or realization, appeared in my office with Faridur Reza Sagor and six proprietors of the Impress Group. He said that they wanted to be partners with *Ajker Kagoj* and were willing to invest. After a couple of days of discussion with Faridur Reza Sagor, Riaz, Siraj, and the rest, I decided they were a good group of people. I felt that it would be beneficial if they supported us. So I agreed to their proposal. We had already spent 70-80 lakhs on the paper, but after Impress invested about 20 lakhs, *Ajker Kagoj* was able to stand on its own feet.

Naim came to me one day and said, "Moti Bhai's (Matiur Rahman) paper was shut down so he's in a bit of a bind. He will write just one column and would like a little space in *Ajker Kagoj*." I said, "Sure. Give it to him."

Then Naim said, "But Shahid Bhai, we have to give him seven thousand taka per month."

Matiur Rahman made a place for himself at *Ajker Kagoj*. We named his column "Main Column." This would be a daily column. He would come in and sit. The young journalists admired him very much. Indeed, he was a likeable person. A leftist, Communist, so he fit in with most of the journalists at *Ajker Kagoj*. With everyone's hard work, the newspaper soon became established. They were all very talented.

Sometime now, Naim started a weekly called *Shomoy*. He set up shop in the alley next door. He took me to see his office on just one occasion. Only later I found out that most of the *Ajker Kagoj* employees spent their time in that office. That was where Matiur Rahman had held court. He was a sweet, honey-tongued man. Soon, he had everyone eating out of his hand. Then, he conspired to bring Saber Hossain on board, giving him ownership, and started work on a new publication. Saber Hossain funded the project. The only

reason Matiur Rahman and Benazir joined *Ajker Kagoj* was to lure everyone away from here and start up a new newspaper. After the deed was done, I found out from Malek that Saber and Matiur Rahman had been on good terms with the DGIF around this time regarding the paper. Even though I had a former student at the DGIF, that is the message I got. Their only intention was to ruin the *Ajker Kagoj* and take my reporters to start their own publication. I suppose it didn't take much effort to rile up young leftist reporters against a colonel-turned-businessman. I even heard that they may have received a bait for partial ownership. Only they can tell if their hopes were realized.

Matiur published a small article in the *Prothom Alo*, which brought the fundamentalists out in a rally. He, shaking with fear, went to the Imam and asked for forgiveness. Barrister Moinul observed this with great interest. That picture was even published in the paper and someone of lower rank lost his job.

I was an engineer by training. Fate drew me to the army. Then I went into business. And, by chance, I became an editor.

I had to present myself in many different courts all over the country for the several hundred cases filed against me, including by the Jamaat-e-Islami because of my position as publisher and editor. I was held responsible for what my journalists wrote, particularly about the concept of the Muktijuddho. The fundamentalists brought out rallies against me for publishing Taslima Nasreen in *Khoborer Kagoj*, and later, for other reasons. They hurled cocktails at my office and home. A man from the NSI came to me one day and warned me that my life was in danger. He advised me not to go for walks early in the morning or in the evening – I should use a treadmill at home.

I did so many things, but I never once begged for forgiveness from anyone. Neither did I fire a journalist or employee because of a case filed against a publication or the rallies that were going on.

At one point, it came to my attention that Naim did not like me visiting *Ajker Kagoj* so often. I noticed that if I suggested anything, he reacted against it – but never to my face or instantly. But it was easy to detect later. Riaz from Impress would come in every day. So would Sagor. *Ajker Kagoj* was making a profit now of about twelve to fourteen lakhs a month. But it wasn't even two months before someone or the other instigated the young journalists, especially the male ones, against me using the fact that we were making profits. They then came together to prepare a list of demands. They themselves called a meeting one day. I went to that meeting where I was presented with the demand list. Summarily, the demand was that the journalists and reporters would be the owners of *Ajker Kagoj*. If I so wanted, I could take some shares and stay involved. They had listed about fourteen points about how they would like the process to be conducted. Just before this list was presented, Matiur Rahman of *Prothom Alo* had published a column titled, "A paper's proprietor should remain as distant as the stars." Cuttings of that article had been made and pasted all over the office. So when I heard their demands, it didn't take me long to figure out who the instigator was. Discussions went on about this for several days.

What I would like to know now is when Matiur Rahman became part owner and editor of *Prothom Alo*, did he abide by these rules and demands?

And if I ask Naim, he laughs and says, "Shahid Bhai, I have forgotten."

Saber Hossain Choudhury was involved with the Abahani. He was a handsome man with a beautiful smile and sweet words. He also owned a weekly, but it had shut down. Under pretense of querying whether that

weekly could be revived, he managed to get Benazir, one of the proprietors, into *Ajker Kagoj*. I didn't realize it then, of course, why Saber Hossain had sent him to me. Then he called me one day and asked if I could meet him at his office.

After I went, Saber Hossain offered me tea and snacks. Then he said, "Shahid Bhai, did you know that all your *Ajker Kagoj* associates are leaving to start a new paper?"

I said, "No. What is the paper called?"

He said one name first, but then corrected himself and said, "*Bhorer Kagoj*."

I said, "I haven't heard of this before but they did give me a list of demands. We're in the process of discussing those at the moment. But where did you get this information?"

"From Nasim at the DGIF."

After I left Saber Hossain's office, I made a call to a Major at the DGIF. He used to be a student of mine. After a little bit of chitchat, I said, "Apparently Nasim Shaheb said something about this to Saber Hossain Choudhury. Can you verify it for me?"

The Major called me in the evening and said, "There is a building behind the IPGMR. Some of you reporters and Matiur Rahman have rented an office there for their new paper. They have set up a computer there and brought in some furniture. That's where they go, but the declaration hasn't been made yet. It's a serious plan – they want to shut down *Ajker Kagoj* and start this new one. This is the current situation. Stop them if you can."

I asked, "Did you hear this from Nasim?"

"Don't worry about that, sir. You wanted to know, so I'm telling you. But we're also keeping an eye on *Ajker Kagoj*."

With a few days in hand, I began to prepare myself. I brought people in from all over – they were employees of my other companies. I even prepared a couple of them. The decision was that we would lay siege to the *Ajker Kagoj* office and remove four or five of them. Naimul Islam Khan would be one of them. I had got rid of Naimul once before but he had protested by coming with a group of supporters to my house. I wasn't ready then – because that was the day my mother passed away. Finding me vulnerable, they had torn out my telephone connections that day and even gone as far as to break up some furniture. They had locked me in my room. Pulok had declared loudly, "We'll do to you what happened to Hamidul Haque Chowdhury. You won't dare set foot on the premises of *Ajker Kagoj* again. You may be the owner, but you will remain outside."

I did not forget that day. So this time, I was well-prepared.

Matiur Rahman was nowhere to be found. Neither was Benazir. I called that Major student of mine and told him that I was going to take over *Ajker Kagoj* that night. I asked him to inform the Dhanmondi Police Station. All he said was, "Sir, please see that there is no direct encounter."

I assured him that there wouldn't be.

At exactly midnight, we arrived at *Ajker Kagoj*. Naim was in a lungi. Seeing me, he immediately escaped jumped over the wall and ran away in that state. A few others followed. Chinu and a couple of others in the pasting room stayed put. According to plan, we surrounded the entire building, and then entered the pasting room. We had an article written for the next day's publication. The headline was "Naim has resigned from *Ajker Kagoj*."

By 4 am, the newspapers were printed and ready. I checked to make sure everything looked okay. Aman-Ud-Dowla called around dawn.

"What's going on, Shahid Bhai?"

I said, "Nothing that wasn't meant to be."

He said, "Do remember that I'm on your side."

"Sure. Come. And bring whoever else wants to come with you tomorrow."

I went back to the office at ten to find that some of them hadn't come. I called Impress to find out that they had gone to meet over there. I stated that except for Naim, everyone could come. And, of course, Matiur Rahman was not allowed.

Unfortunately, I had no idea how organized they were or how far they had already gone. Not only did they publish a newspaper, they also filed a case. They went to each intellectual, columnist, and everyone at Dhaka University. In short, they took control of the entire city.

So, on one side was a retired colonel and business; on the other was a group of left-wing intellectuals. Almost everyone was a student of Dhaka University and they knew all the writers and professors from beforehand. Their teachers were like their big brothers, so naturally, the sympathies of the intellectual group were with them.

In the meantime, the runaways had begun to use the office behind the IPGMR and prepared a dummy. I got to know the name of the paper too – *Bhorer Kagoj*. Only later did I learn that it was Saber Hossain Choudhury who had financed Matiur Rahman.

I continued to publish *Ajker Kagoj* with the people who had remained and with some employees from my other offices. We had wanted to highlight the ideals of the Muktijuddho through *Ajker Kagoj*. We had wanted to inspire the younger generation towards non-communalism in the new democracy. So, with renewed vigor, we set to work. We too sent messengers from door to door. No one really responded at first, but then, among the first to come on board were Dr. Rafiqul Islam and Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun. Others from the university were encouraged by their presence and came forward to join us.

Around this time, men like Dr. Syed Modasser Ali came to us. Some time later, we got Dr. M A Wazed Ali Miah, the nuclear scientist. Then, one by one, we saw the entrance in our midst of the litterateur Shawkat Osman, Professor Zillur Rahman Siddique, Poet Shamsur Rahman, Playwright Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, and the rentry of those who had been with us since the time of *Khoborer Kagoj*. Several heavyweight columnists were now with us. One of *Ajker Kagoj*'s innovations among many was the double spread editorial on international affairs. So our efforts continued to keep the tradition of continuing this

column, rejuvenating hidden historical facts, and illustrating our progressive ideals. In fact, our attempts gained momentum now.

But it was difficult to find replacements for the sharp and highly talented young people with whom I had started *Khoborer Kagoj* or even *Ajker Kagoj*. Still, I began to train a new group of young reporters.

Within a few days, Matiur Rahman came to see me. He took charge again, but within a couple of months, he published a report on Salman F Rahman. This man called me and said, "Shahid Bhai, how could you print something like this against me?" Without blaming or chastising him, I told Matiur Rahman that Salman Rahman had called about the piece he had written. Before I could go any further, he snatched the words from my mouth and said, "What is your problem here?"

I replied, "No, it's not like that."

But he refused to listen to anything else and said, "I can't work independently here!" Then he took out a letter of resignation from his pocket – it was already typed. He gave it to me and strode out. A few days later, Matiur Rahman Chowdhury started a new magazine called *Banglabazar* – with several members of my staff.

We had been able to handle the exodus of our reporters once, but this second round left us quite weak. A few months after this, Impress notified us of their reluctance to stay with us. After the two rounds of attacks, the paper wasn't making profit anymore, so it was not unreasonable for them to want to withdraw. People invest so they can make a profit. Competition in the market was at its height, and I was doubtful about whether *Ajker Kagoj* could turn around and return to its former standing. Where everyone else had been devious, Sagor and Riaz were very upfront and perfect in their behavior. So, even today, I continue to treat them as my younger brothers, and I believe they think of me in the same way as before.

I became solely responsible for the paper now. In addition to writing about the Bangla language, Bangalis, Bangabandhu, and the Liberation War, we had become involved in the new movements of the time. We still had much to do in exposing the traitors, the Al-Badrs, the Al-Shams, and the agents. So there was no other option for me but to hold on to *Ajker Kagoj*.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Movement for the Progressive Ideals of *Ajker Kagoj*

Ajker Kagoj was revolutionary. It adopted new aspects of journalism and became a torchbearer. It was instrumental in establishing the profession so that it appealed to the younger generation. Of course, this was interrupted occasionally by different challenges and even legal cases. As an editor, I spent over 600 days at the court. I even had to suffer prison sentences. In addition, there were several warrants issued against me. The number of cases filed against me was 87. I will tell you about a couple of them here. I'm sure you'll enjoy them.

Once, I was faced with a case in Rajshahi. The then VC of Rajshahi University filed the case against me. Apparently, he had been defamed in a report published by our newspaper. A warrant was issued for me, so I traveled to Rajshahi to face the charges. I was going to stay at a resthouse of the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation. I appeared in court with a group of lawyers, Sagor, Riaz, and others. Sagor and Riaz were still affiliated with *Ajker Kagoj*. The arrest warrant was lifted and a new date for the hearing was set.

We asked to meet with the VC, who generously allowed us a meeting. He was a hot-tempered man and began raging and storming. He kept saying that he would deal with us, he could have us abducted by his men. He was the Vice Chancellor of a university and he had men? After we heard him out, I laughed and said, "So, does that mean our report was in error?" His raging stopped abruptly. Again, I said, "Can you really send your men to kidnap an editor? Listen, let me tell you something. It will benefit both you and us. I'm giving you an ultimatum of seven days. Withdraw the case. You're a respectable man and that will keep your respectability intact. Otherwise, if I speak to you the same way you did as you have just shown me, you will not remain respectable."

My words muted the VC completely. We said our salaams and left. And he withdrew the case.

There was another case in Dinajpur. So I presented myself there, putting up at the Circuit House. The DC came to visit and so did the SP, and we had a great time chatting and eating. In the morning, I arrived at the court premises with my allies. The entire place was filled. Suddenly, slogans were chanted and I made it into the courthouse with some difficulty. The magistrate arrived but there was no sign of the plaintiff, or even of his representatives. How strange! There was a case but no plaintiff or lawyer. What kind of case was this? We had about a hundred lawyers. The rumor was that the two plaintiffs in the case did come but seeing the unexpected sea of people, one had run away and the other could not be found. The court, thus, ordered the excited crowd to leave the courtroom when someone said that the one of the two plaintiffs was sitting under the table of the magistrate's office. This led to a shutdown of the court premises. The police and magistrate managed to escort the plaintiff to the latter's chamber. Finally, the case was dismissed. The plaintiff belonged to the Jamaat Party.

Ajker Kagoj was primarily a movement, a revolution. It believed in the ideology of Bangali nationalism with the goal of reviving the ideals of the Liberation War.

I think it was during the early days of *Ajker Kagoj*, sometime in '92 possibly, when I had travelled from Panchagarh to Syedpur on my way to Dhaka when Awami League leaders Abdus Salam Azad, Sajeda Choudhury and a few others got on the same plane as me. As soon as they saw me, they grew quite excited

and kept saying, "Here is our *Ajker Kagoj* – here is our Kazi Shahid who is doing all these," and other such things.

From the *Khoborer Kagoj* era, the efforts to express our progressive principles and rejuvenate the ideals of the Liberation War were never so lauded that anyone from the Awami League would call me "our Kazi Shahid." The core of our values was the huge sacrifice and victory of the Liberation War and to reestablish the true history of the War and make a stand against distortions. We also wanted to recapture in social and political life the respect due to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu and to the self-sacrifice of the thousands of people who fought for a non-communal, democratic nation during the War of Liberation. We took part in the fight against an autocrat as a way to implement these values. And, in the early days of the reestablishment of democracy, we accepted the difficult and dangerous challenge of resisting the fundamentalists as our next agenda.

We were not such fools that we didn't realize that our values and goals would bolster the politics of the Awami League. But neither were we the type to remain silent for fear of being accused of aiding the politics of the Awami League just because we believed in the non-communal ideals of Bangabandhu and the War of Liberation.

Ajker Kagoj celebrated its first year anniversary in 1992 with an iftar party at Hotel Sonargaon. Except for Sheikh Hasina, all other leaders of the Awami League attended. There were about a hundred guests. On the other hand, apart from Khaleda Zia and Saifur Rahman, almost all BNP leaders came as well. Saifur Rahman had his anger out on me by sending me to jail, but I think he had completely got over it yet.

Ajker Kagoj was now a reputed paper, read by all. We began to need more columnists and encouraged a lot of those who had never written a column for any paper before.

Those at the top of our best columnists were the playwright Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, litterateur Shawkat Osman, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, poet Shamsur Rahman, and Syed Shamsul Haque. Many who are well-recognized personalities in columns and talk shows today wrote for us, like Syed Abul Maqsood and Brigadier Shakhawat Hossain. As far as I know, their regular column-writing began with the sub-editorial pages of *Ajker Kagoj*.

When I turn on the television today and see J E Mamun or Munni Saha, I remember their young faces during the early days of *Khoborer Kagoj* or *Ajker Kagoj*. I revel in their success today. I feel the same way when I see Naimul Islam Khan or Zillur or Manzoor, and many others. I even remember Naim, Nizam, and even Matiur Rahman Tuku.

We had to shut down *Ajker Kagoj* in 2007 due to the financial crisis of the institution. That was one of the most sorrowful days of my life. And yet, twenty years after we began upholding the values of the Liberation War through *Ajker Kagoj*, when I hear the voices of the young generation spouting fiery speeches and riling up Shahbagh, I feel that, although we had to shut down the paper, in the end, we did win.

Chapter Forty

Mass Awakening – Chapter the First

The Committee for Eradicating the Killers and Collaborators of '71(Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee) was formed in March 1992. About ten or twelve days after the formation of this committee, I went to meet the main coordinator, Shaheed Janani[64] Jahanara Imam at her home to assure her of my and *Ajker Kagoj*'s complete support. She had said, "It's not enough to simply give moral support to make a movement like this successful, we also need a lot of money." I immediately promised my financial support as well. And I did not break my promise. If she needed me, I always responded to her call. I did everything I could to support her.

That's not all. On the day the war criminals were publicly tried by the people's court at the Ramna Race Course Maidan, I donated eighty thousand taka to Jahanara Imam's cause.

Because I had expressed my solidarity with the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee, BNP leader Barrister Nazmul Huda (then the Information Minister) called me in one day. Accompanied by my news editor, Reza Arefin, I went to his office only to be completely shocked by his behavior. For almost one hour, he rained insults on me. He also tried to tell me what the responsibilities of a paper were. I humbly listened quietly to everything.

Then I said, "You've snatched all my ads away. What else will you do now?"

He replied, "Just wait and see."

I had already been introduced to this system during Ershad's regime. So I also heatedly let him know that I hadn't leased my conscience out to anyone. The paper would do what it needed to do.

I stopped getting ads from the government for my paper and I had to delve into my other businesses for funds. During this time, one day, Dr. Syed Modasser Ali appeared in my office. He came to the point soon enough. Very clearly, he said that he had been sent here by Sheikh Hasina, who wanted to know whether I would agree to running for office in the next election if I were given a nomination from Jessore by the Awami League.

I said, "Chacha (Raushan Ali) is still alive."

Modasser Ali Shaheb said, "I'm only conveying the message to you as instructed. It's up to you to say yes or no."

This direct invitation put me in a dilemma. I was a businessman; I wasn't supposed to get into politics. And the thought had never even occurred to me. But I couldn't dismiss the idea completely. I thought for a while and finally, I ended up saying, "Fine. I agree." I thought of my inexperience in the political arena but felt reassured by the thought that if Sheikh Hasina deemed me able, then she would guide me.

Modasser Ali Shaheb called Sheikh Hasina immediately, right in front of me, to tell her of my assent. They had a brief conversation about this at the time. That night, I came home and shared the proposal with my wife and sons. Ameenah was not happy. She didn't want me involved in politics at all. She cried and

[64] Mother of a Martyr – Jahanara Imam's son, Rumi, was a freedom fighter who was martyred in the Liberation War. His friends honored his mother by naming her "Shaheed Janani".

said, “Don’t do it. You won’t be able to do it. I know you. Politics is not for you. I’ve been with you since Risalpur. You can’t do it.”

Even after two or three months, Ameenah remained unmoved in her decision. At intervals, she would say, “Send a message or pay a visit yourself and tell them that it’s not possible for you to get into politics.”

But how could I do that? Firstly, I had given my word. Secondly, it wasn’t possible for me to back out. Still, because of my dilemma, I remained silent. So when Dr. Syed Modasser Ali asked me to meet Sheikh Hasina, I avoided it. I have always been a simple, straightforward man, but, for the first time, I was in a quandary.

Sometime now, I went to Jessore to inaugurate the *Ajker Kagoj* bureau office. That same day, Sheikh Hasina was travelling to Khulna through Jessore for a party event. A few members of our Jessore Bureau Office and some leaders from the Jessore Awami League went to the airport to request Sheikh Hasina to come and inaugurate the *Ajker Kagoj* bureau office on her way to Khulna. She agreed right away.

The event took place on the ground floor of the office building. Sheikh Hasina thus inaugurated the *Ajker Kagoj* bureau office in Jessore on 21 January 1994.

She also gave a speech where she said, “*Ajker Kagoj* will speak about our independence, about the Muktijuddho, about democracy. It will play a strong role in supporting our independence, the Muktijuddho, our democracy. This is my expectation from *Ajker Kagoj* and this is the expectation of the nation.”

Afterwards, she went upstairs and had tea with us. We took a picture there. Within the frame that day were Ameenah and I sitting beside Sheikh Hasina and Nabil standing behind us.

As she sipped her tea, Sheikh Hasina addressed Ameenah directly and said, “I’m launching your husband in politics. I hope you agree.” Caught off-guard, Ameenah instantly replied, “Of course.” Sheikh Hasina then said, “Well, then, today there is a program in Khulna for the mayor election candidate Hiron. I will bring your husband on stage there. His political launching will take place there.”

What could Ameenah say after that?

When Sheikh Hasina asked me to accompany her to Khulna, I did. On the stage in Khulna, the leader sat in front with the other important leaders of the party, while I sat in the back row. But the organizers of the event brought me forward and sat me down right next to Sheikh Hasina. Everyone gave a speech on her instruction. Accordingly, I also gave a speech at the meeting that day. But it wasn’t a good speech. After the program, I went to the Circuit House, paid my respects to her, and left.

Ameenah didn’t say anything after this. But she cried. She was certain that entering politics would only cause us sorrow.

Ajker Kagoj was at its height in popularity among the local dailies. Not only were we intent on writing articles to rejuvenate the values we had targeted, we also held innovative events and initiatives. One of the ideas that came up was to award a prize at the Bangali New Year celebration for The Greatest Bangali of the Century. We asked for suggestions from respected intellectuals as well as from our readers.

That prize was formally awarded on Pohela Baishakh 1401, Thursday (14 April 1994) at a grand event. The prize was a gold medal. The award for The Greatest Bangali of the Century was accepted on behalf of Bangabandu by Sheikh Rehana. We also awarded five other great Bangali personalities. They were The

Greatest Muktijoddha of the Century, Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam; The Greatest Journalist of the Century, Mohammed Nasir Uddin; The Greatest Artiste of the Century, Patua Kamrul Hasan; The Greatest Female Organizer, Poet Sufia Kamal; and The Poet of the Century, Shamsur Rahman.

Unfortunately, by doing this, I became an enemy in the eyes of those who stood against our values. However, I did not actually realize this at the time. Apparently, those who lauded me to my face also went behind my back to malign me.

It was 1994, and the birthday of Bangabandhu's eldest son, Sheikh Kamal. Abahani would be celebrating his birthday for the first time on behalf of his supporters. I agreed to join in when they told me it was for the birthday celebration. A day later, I was informed that they were trying to have Sheikh Rehana at the program. I said, "That would be great."

There were many people on the stage during the event. Sheikh Rehana had come but refused to come on stage. The organizers tried for some time until finally, they requested me to ask her.

I made a request to her over the microphone to come on the stage. She complied and came on stage, sitting beside me. At one point in the program, we all stood up, when suddenly I felt a tap on my hand. I turned around, knowing that it was Sheikh Rehana who had tapped me. She said, "Shahid Bhai, you have done what a brother would do."

I was pleased – as I usually am in cases like this. Inwardly, I feel very proud and inspired but I can't express my joy in any proper manner. I simply looked at her, smiled, and sat down.

A few days before this incident, Dr. Wazed Ali had come to me with a proposal. He wanted to write a series of articles for *Ajker Kagoj*. The subject matter would be "Some Incidents Involving Bangabandhu." But he had a condition – each article needed to be dedicated to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu. And it had to be in a designated box.

When I accepted his condition, Wazed Shaheb was a little surprised. Then he appeared at my office one day with an article in hand. He read it out to me himself. His articles were published weekly, so we would meet at least once a week.

Dr. Wazed turned out to be a humble, but strict man. We couldn't publish his article until he had seen the proof and given his final consent. I came to know a lot of things about Bangabandhu through him. He also wrote about their pain, agony, and sorrow after 15 August. Whenever he came to the *Ajker Kagoj*, he stayed until late. And, despite my busy schedule, I always listened to him with attention while we ate his favorite biscuits with tea. He wouldn't eat anything else. He only went home after the pasting of his article was completed. It was a long article that had been serialized for a while and there were many readers too. We also received many phone calls thanking us for such a wonderful piece of writing.

Even though the movement against the dictator was over, there was the air of new protests. It seemed to be a movement to regain '71 in our own way. On the one hand, Taslima had gone too far and allowed the fundamentalists to gain the upper hand to even have her exiled; on the other, the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee was gaining ground daily. Alongside *Ajker Kagoj*, those who had been struck dumb after '75 and those who were new and never had the opportunity to say "Joy Bangla! Joy Bangabandhu!" now extended the call beyond party lines towards a nationwide unified call.

This was one of the things that gave me peace among the many challenges I had. In spite of this, I would remember the twenty-year-old little brother, Moin, whom I lost during the Muktijuddho.

I decided then that I would file a case myself against the war criminals. My case would be against Golam Azam. But where and why would I file this case?

I would file the case in Jessore because that's where my brother, Kazi Moinul Hasan, was murdered and Golam Azam was responsible for his death. With this in mind, I went first to Sheikh Hasina to hear what she thought and get her consent.

She listened to me with great patience, and tears rolled down her face. But she was very happy to hear about the case.

After my visit with Sheikh Hasina, I went to see Khaleda Zia. I narrated my story once more. After hearing it, the only thing she said was, "It's your right. You can certainly file a case."

I understood the situation right away. I went to General Nasim now. He was the DGIF Chief then. After I finished narrating my story, he jumped up from his chair, saluted me and said, "Shahid Bhai, somebody or the other would have to do it. It could be you."

All I needed now was to move forward. After I left General Nasim's office, I got ready to travel to Jessore. But, one day before I left for Jessore, I learned that some people (I won't name them) were against my filing of the case. They were of the opinion that there was no point in reawakening an issue that was over and would only cause an upset in Jessore.

Still, we headed out in a train of cars, going through Mawa instead of Aricha. We arrived at the Jessore Circuit House by ten in the morning. Our people had already been notified of our arrival and within a brief peiord, they had surrounded the Circuit House compound. Barrister Amir-Ul-Islam had come from Dhaka to act as our lawyer. Amir Bhai loved the press and being in the news. Khan Tipu Sultan from Jessore stayed behind while the rest of us marched to the Judge's Court. The case was filed – on 15 December 1993, case number P-464/93(15/12/93) and it was accepted at court. This became the headline of the next day's newspaper. Later on, though, the police submitted a final report stating that there were no witnesses or evidence.

I didn't care a whit about that. I had done what I set out to do. Almost two decades after this incident, Sheikh Hasina's government set out to punish the war criminals. This is still ongoing. The verdict had been implemented. This was a huge achievement for me just like it was for every proud Bangali.

Chapter Forty-one

The Politics of Elections – The Beginning

We received news one day that the popular Awami League leader of Jessore, former MP, Raushan Ali Shaheb had passed away. Sheikh Hasina was to attend the challisha[65] with the other central leaders. I handed twenty-five thousand taka to Firoz and went to attend with Ameenah. During the prayers, Ameenah, I, and Raushan Chacha's wife sat close to the Awami League President, Sheikh Hasina. Jessore BNP leader Tariqul Islam came forward to greet Sheikh Hasina who smiled and returned the greeting. As soon as he left the scent, Sheikh Hasina nudged Ameenah lightly and said, "He is your opponent."

After the program, we came out to find Sharif Abdur Rakib quite agitated. Rakib was then the General Secretary of Awami League in the district of Jessore. He was railing against me and half of the party's members had aligned with him. I gathered some people and went from each police station to station, union to union and door to door in Jessore. I also arranged different events and made some speeches. Gradually, I understood how the election campaigns worked. During this process, I also came to know how important the electoral symbol was. This would be difficult to understand for those sitting in a living room in Dhaka and debating. The local respectable elders desired one thing only – a good person who was educated and moderate, but with the right electoral symbol. Those who were stamped with this symbol were able to work effectively in mitigating disputes. Some people, though, used the symbol for personal gain. The same symbol, then, could be used for good or bad and was, in fact, used in both ways. The country had become divided between two symbols – the boat and the sheaf of paddy. The symbol protected everyone. It helped in the offices. In the meantime, I noticed that those in the Awami League who had been excited about me in the early days were now expressing doubts. I, of course, didn't think much of it at the time.

I would visit Jessore. My father's home had been built in 1932-33. I extended the building, made a second story, and organized the area. The land in front our homestead belonged to Tariqul's older brother, Shiraj. I bought that land and built my office on it.

I called in the OC, DC, and SP of Jessore, new or old, at least once and requested them for one thing, "There will be no hooliganism here. You have to ensure that. I too will remain alert with my people in every village to every police station."

Even today, I can confidently state that during the time I spent in Jessore, there was very little hooliganism in Jessore town. However, around this time, there was a bomb attack on the town hall where Udichi, the largest cultural organization in Bangladesh, was holding a program. I had a word with Tariqul about this too. Tariqul was the MP at that time. He agreed with me, just like a younger brother. He was always very respectful towards me. I too helped him in any little way I could as necessary, but, I have to say, he never asked me for a penny.

Politics required money. It is not possible to entertain people, hold meetings, build stages, rent mics, send messengers, bring people, and so on, without funds. Those who lack personal funds had to rely on donations from others to help out.

The election was drawing near. My relationship with Begum Khaleda Zia was not bad. In fact, it was quite amiable. Unfortunately, because I was campaigning to represent Awami League, the relationship did not remain as before. Begum Khaleda Zia's younger brother, Sayeed Iskander was my student at the

[65] The prayer meet that took place on the fortieth day after the death of a Muslim.

Bangladesh Military Academy. He was a good student whom I had sent to the Core of Engineers. General Ziaur Rahman and I had been in the Pakistan Army together. I had met him in Pakistan in '65-'66. We were both young at the time. He was a captain. There were so few Bangali army officers in the whole of Pakistan then. Our relationship with the wives of our senior officers were as sisters or sisters-in-law. They too would take care of us like little brothers.

Ajker Kagoj published reports on Begum Khaleda Zia and the different scandals of her government. I too wrote some things, which led to the publication of two books, in fact, titled "Amar Lekha" and "Ghore Aagun Legecche." When I read these books in these last years of my life, I am surprised. My writing is not worthy of contributing much to the world of literature, but these two books represent the reality of an era. Those who harbor alternative views from mine calle me up even today to ask, "So Shahid Bhai, why don't you write anymore?"

I respond, "Well, everything has its time. Others will write now. Still others will write after them. That's who it goes."

We used to have round table discussions at *Ajker Kagoj* every day (except Fridays) at noon. Those meetings were our lifeline. There was nothing we didn't discuss there. We talked about reading books. I bought books for everyone to read and advised them to read at least one book every month. They should read poetry, listen to music, and meet their mothers. I treated them just like my own sons or daughters.

I had gone to Dr. Rafiqul Islam's home to request him to write the editorial for *Ajker Kagoj*. I had already asked Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun to be present there at the time. I didn't need to ask Dr. Rafiqul Islam twice. He wrote the editorial for *Ajker Kagoj* without a break from the beginning of the paper till the time when Sheikh Hasina came to power for the first time. Later, he edited *Ajker Shompadona* from the office of *Ajker Kagoj*. Dr. Rafiqul Islam and Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun visited the *Ajker Kagoj* office every day. It's obvious that the paper did not rise on its own. Its success was due to the contributions of many people.

Ajker Kagoj was a milestone in the history of Bangladeshi journalism. Naimul Islam Khan had once made a list and shown me that *Ajker Kagoj* had contributed almost a hundred new trends in journalism which others are following today.

Sometimes I would sit and watch dramas with my youngest son. He loved to watch Humayun Ahmed productions. If I was home, I had to watch with him. Suddenly, one day, in one of these plays, I heard a parrot yelling "Tui Razakar!"[66] at the homeowner and all the good people. The playwright may have written this in jest, but to me, it seemed wrong. I felt that using the word "Razakar" to create laughter made light of the heinousness of their crimes.

I decided that I needed to do something. So, from 1 December 1999, *Ajker Kagoj* began a series. It was titled "Tui Razakar!" The notorious aids of the Pakistani attackers were published as caricatures with one of their quotations from the time of the War printed underneath. Some samples are given below:

[PICTURE]

Golam Azam

[66] "You Razakar!" Razakars were the local Bangalis who had betrayed their nation and aided the Pakistani soldiers during the Liberation War.

On 25 September 1971, Golam Azam said, “If Pakistan no longer exists, then living has no meaning for the members of the Jamaat.”

[PICTURE]

Abbas Ali Khan

Similarly, another Jamaat leader, Abbas Ali Khan’s caricature was published on 2 December with a quote of his from 14 November: “Pakistan will live forever. It is our responsibility to eliminate its enemies completely.”

[PICTURE]

Maulana Mannan

On 3 December, Maulana Manna’s picture was published. At the very beginning of the War, on 25 April 1971, he had said, “The patriotic masses of East Pakistan are coming forth with the zeal of crusaders to uproot the armed infiltrators and separatists.” And yet, it is unfortunate for the Bangali people that the autocrat General Ershad had made this Maulana Mannan a minister and not only allowed him to publish a daily called *Inqilab*, but supported him wholeheartedly.

[PICTURE]

Matiur Rahman Nizami

On 4 December, the following quotation was published from Matiur Rahman Nizami, the Chief of the Badr mercenaries, which he had spoken on 23 September 1971: “The terrorist [in other words, *the guerrilla forces who were identified as terrorists*] acts that the armed Indian invaders and their local agents are perpretrating can only be stopped by the East Pakistani patriotic youths who love Islam, and are therefore they are the true lovers of Pakistan.”

[PICTURE]

Maulana Abdur Rahim

5 December saw the publication of Maulana Abdur Rahim’s quotation from 23 August 1971: “It is not possible for the army to tackle the guerrilla war being fought by the group of people who are engaged in vicious and destructive activities. These vicious people wander around the villages and pitch camps, and then they run away at any indication that the army is approaching. … This is why the Razakar and Mujahid Armies had be organized.”

[PICTURE]

Abdus Sabur Khan

On 6 December, the words of Khan Abdus Sabur Khan, the double-Khan, spoken on 8 October 1971, were published: “The public will make the highest sacrifices to retain their freedom. They fought against British rule. Now they are ready to die for the sake of Pakistan.”

[PICTURE]

Kazi Abdul Kader

Razakar Kazi Abdul Kader, on 8 April 1971, that is towards the very beginning of the Muktijuddho, said, “The recent measures taken by the army of East Pakistan are timely and appropriate. As the President, Yahya Khan has adopted the right steps.” This was published on 7 December 1991.

[PICTURE]

Ashrafuzzaman Khan

On 9 December, with information gathered from the document titled “Where are the Killers and Collaborators of ’71 Now?” we published the story of Ashrafuzzaman Khan’s dedication to his work. In 1971, he was a member of the Islami Chchatra Shangha Al Badr High Command. This man is accused of shooting to death seven teachers of Dhaka University and several well-known journalists.

[PICTURE]

Khaleq Majumdar

We published the story of A B M Khaleq Majumdar on 10 December. He was the Office Secretary of the Jamaat-e-Islami in 1971. A group of the Badr members, under his guidance, kidnapped and murdered the journalist Shahidullah Kaiser. In the ruling of the Shahidullah Kaiser murder case, Special Judge F Rahman found him guilty, stating that the defendant worked as a collaborator of the Pakistani Army and kidnapped Shahidullah Kaiser with the intention of murdering him.

[PICTURE]

Ali Ahsan Mujahid

A quotation by the Command Chief of the East Pakistan Al Badr Forces was published on 11 December 1991. On 10 December 1971, this man had called for a fatal attack on the “enemy” at a rally by the Badr Forces and promised that “Pakistan would be protected at all costs.”

[PICTURE]

Muhammad Kamaruzzaman

A quotation from Muhammad Kamaruzzaman was published in the 12 December 1971 issue of *Tui Razakar*. He was the leader of the student branch of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chchatra Shangha in Mymensingh and the chief organizer of the Al Badr Forces in 1971.

[PICTURE]

Ayen Ud Din

On 13 December 1991, a quotation from Muslim League leader Ayen Ud Din published in the *Dainik Sangram* on 4 August 1971, was reprinted in the *Tui Razakar* series. This man was also the Chair of the Peace Committee in Rajshahi in 1971. During the closing ceremony of the training of the first group of the Razakar Forces held at the local Jinnah Islamic Institute, an oath was sworn on the Holy Qu’ran. The Chair of the Peace Committee, Mr. Ayen Ud Din stressed on the necessity for the Razakar Forces to remain alert about fulfilling their responsibilities. He urged the Razakars to faithfully continue the battle to uphold the values of Pakistan and prevent the separation of the states.

[PICTURE]

A S M Solaiman

14 December 1991 saw the publication of an arrogant quotation from A S M Solaiman, the Chair of the Krishak-Sramik Party. On 15 November 1971, he had said, “The Razakars have done an extremely praiseworthy job and they should be declared as national heroes.”

[PICTURE]

Maulana A K M Yousuf

On 15 December 1991, we published a quotation by Maulana A K M Yousuf (the founder of the Razakars): “Some of our youths, being ignorant about the creation of Pakistan, have been influenced by the false propaganda of the Indians. They have crossed the border and are now conspiring with the Indians to sabotage our country. Spread out to the far ends of the country to annihilate these saboteurs and uproot Bangali nationalism completely. If we are forced into a war, the heroic army and the the heroic Razakars will fight back equally hard.” He gave this speech on 26 October 1971.

President Abdur Rahman Biswas. We don’t want to ridicule the President but we cannot let Biswas off either. So, on 16 December 1991, on Victory Day, the *Ajker Kagoj* published, “Yes, we have ‘Biswas’ (trust)” – that one day, together we would identify all the known Razakars in hiding and bring them to justice.

The *Tui Razakar* series had created quite an impact in the country. Some, though, had asked of what use could it be.

When I now see how Shahbagh has risen with the voices of the young generation, when I see the verdicts of the cases against the war criminals, I feel feel privileged to have witnessed these days in my lifetime.

After the publication of the *Tui Razakar* series, the fundamentalists were ready to take up arms against me. These oppositional forces spread rumors about me, about *Ajker Kagoj* through rallies and protests. They even held mass gatherings for this.

The government also began filing different cases against me and *Ajker Kagoj*. At this time, I had a discussion as the Chairman of BSP, on what measures to take. There were also a lot of debate about this at the UNB offices. Finally, I went to Sheikh Hasina and had a talk with her. The outcome was a decision to hold a protest meeting against the oppression in front of the Press Club. We even fixed a time for the meeting. The fundamentalists grew desperate to abort our protest meeting. At the same time, every reporter, official, administrator at *Ajker Kagoj* together declared that we were equally determined to make this a success. The Chief Guest of the protest meeting was to be the poet Shamsur Rahman. He has always been vocal against fundamentalists. The situation grew so restless that the poet had to spend the night in my house the day before the meeting so that he could march to the Press Club with a rally starting from the *Ajker Kagoj* office. The fundamentalists, on this day, gathered every student from most of the madrasahs in Mohammadpur, placing sticks, different banners and festoons in their hands, and marched with a huge rally down Satmasjid Road towards the *Ajker Kagoj* office in Jhigatola. The journalists, officers, and well-wishers of *Ajker Kagoj* were making their own preparations with festoons, banners, and miniature national flags.

We took up our position in front of the Jhigatola bus stand with the little flags tied onto small bamboo sticks. I had also spoken to the editor of *Janakantha*, Masud Shaheb. Some of his people were coming too. Masud kept calling me but I had no idea where he was. At one time, the two rallies came face to face.

The OC of the Dhanmondi Police Station met with me. We all made a decision and informed the OC that if any rally of the fundamentalists had to pass through Satmasjid Road, it would be over our dead bodies.

To avoid any bloodshed, the police intercepted the fundamentalists' rally at Dhanmondi Road 15 bus stand and directed them to another path. Then the *Ajker Kagoj* rally proceeded to march down Dhanmondi Road 2 towards the Press Club. But the police stopped us in front of City College. We argued with them when at one point, the police asked us to get rid of the sticks on which our flags were attached. We needed to march on, so we complied with the order. Poet Shamsur Rahman had led the rally that day – it was something he had never done before.

On the day before the rally, Kazi Aref Ahmed from JSD and Abdur Razzak Shaheb from the Awami League told me that we needed to ensure a huge audience at the gathering. Some costs were involved here, they said. So I handed sixty thousand taka to them to make arrangments for another five to ten thousand people.

When we arrived at the Press Club, I saw that both Razzak Bhai and Kazi Aref were present, but instead of the five or ten thousand they promised, there were only five or seven people. Then Justice K M Sobhan arrived. I received reports that the *Janakantha* office had been barricaded by the police and no one could get out. I was surprised at this. It was the job of the police to barricade, and ours to break through. How could the people at *Janakantha* remain imprisoned?

In the meantime, a huge rally of fundamentalists approached from the direction of Baitul Mukarram. We also organized ourselves. Our speeches continued. The main point of our speeches to ask for the release of *Janakantha*'s Masud and four others. Finally, our meeting ended amidst all this chaos.

Masud called me up one day and said, "Shahid Bhai, neither I nor anyone of the *Janakantha* family will ever forget what you did for me and for *Janakantha*." It should be noted here that Masud was finally released by the High Court on bail as a result of our protest.

Many respected members of the community would visit the *Ajker Kagoj* office. Arrivals would begin from ten in the morning and continue till midnight or one in the morning with only a couple of hours in the middle for lunch. The rest of the time I dedicated to these people. I used to have my lunch at the office, always accompanied by someone or the other, but most commonly, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun, and Dr. Syed Modasser Ali. Dr. Wazed Ali Miah, Syed Abul Hasan, litterateur Shawkat Osman, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, Justice K M Sobhan, and Barrister Amirul Islam were frequent visitors as well. Dr. Kamal Hossain and Barrister Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed also visited and, of course, there was poet Shamsur Rahman. In addition, there was the writer Khandakar Mazharul Islam who visited often and wrote many articles for *Ajker Kagoj*. He was my wife's cousin on the paternal side and he was always joyful. Unfortunately, he had a heart attack at a very young age and passed away in 2003.

Mustafa Sarwar Shaheb visited once or twice, but he would call me quite often to ask how things were. I would call him sometimes too. He would also call if anything was happening at *Ajker Kagoj*.

The diplomat M Mohiuddin did not visit much, but he wrote for us often. His column was vocal against the fundamentalists and the daily *Inqilab*. It is difficult to believe that the current version of the paper is the same one as that published in 1996. I called M Mohiuddin once and gave him this update. He was very happy to hear it.

I had been making visits to my hometown in Jessore all along. I would not only stay there but meet people as well. People poured into our house all day long and I went to their homes too. I was also involved in

some development projects in Jessore. It's interesting how those who do thejob believe they've done so much and those who receive think it is so little! You may say that it is better then not to do anything at all. What was the use for it? If you did nothing, no one would talk. So it was better. That's true. But there will always be those in this world who do for others.

I organized a program at the birthplace of Michael Madhushun in Sagordari, inviting many respected intellectuals from Dhaka: Kabir Chowdhury, Poet Shamsur Rahman, Rahat Khan, and others who all stayed at my home in Jessore. I also organized many other such events in Jessore. Participants at these different programs included Begum Sajeda Chowdhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Tofael Ahmed, Mohammad Nasim, Professor Abu Sayeed, Syeda Johra Tajuddin, and others.

I loved this kind of activity. I found both my paper and my politics to be addictive, severely so. Rashed Mosharraf and Suranjit Sengupta would come to the *Ajker Kagoj* office quite often. And, of course, there was Professor Abu Sayeed. He used to use our office almost like a propaganda office. Whatever pictures or leaflets or printing he needed to spread his message, he would get done from *Ajker Kagoj*. He was a hard worker but it was difficult to trust him. Then there was M A Mannan. This man became upset with me for some reason in the early days of my nomination. There were others who were good people. It wasn't that they would come and sit by me, but they would come to the paper's office.

A S H K Sadek Shaheb from Jessore did not visit much. He was a grave man. I had heard that he had opposed me in Jessore and that he would complain about me to our leader. After all, he was a Secretary – neither their harm nor their contribution could be detected in any way.

S A M S Kibria was a close ally. He would come whenever I invited him and any time there was an event at *Ajker Kagoj*. A good writer, he used to write for our paper too. Professor Zillur Rahman Siddique was from Jessore too. He was very fond of me and, always helpful, he would come whenever I asked.

Manzur-E-Mowla, Hasnat Abdul Hye, Mohammed Ali, and many other Secretaries contributed to *Ajker Kagoj*. I cannot exhaust the list of the innumerable people who had considered the office of *Ajker Kagoj* as a regular haunt.

When the intellectuals' stand against the fundamentalists was gaining strength day by day, a sudden confusion arose. Towards the beginning of July 1994, pictures of Sheikh Hasina and Matiur Rahman Nizami were published in a newspaper. It appeared as though they had been present together at some personal event but the political scenario was disturbed. There was a lot of talk about this for a while. Those who frequented the premises of *Ajker Kagoj* also expressed their concern regarding the reason for this. I sat down to have a discussion with my colleagues and we decided to hold a meeting on 9 July 1994 to voice our protest against communal fundamentalism and opponents of our independence. We would invite intellectuals, poets, writers, authors, teachers, freedom fighters, journalists, editors, and other respected members of the community. On the scheduled date, a lively discussion took place in the meeting room on the ground floor of the *Ajker Kagoj* office. The speakers spoke freely about their beliefs and the situation was discussed in the light of history. The main topic of discussion was the evidence of connections between the Awami Leagues, the leading force behind the Liberation War, and the Jamaat, the leading opposition force of the Liberation War. Though there were many participants at this discussion event, the more notable ones included Former Chief Justice Kamal Uddin Hossain, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, Poet Shamsur Rahman, Dr. Durgadas Bhattacharya, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, Dr. Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, journalist Obaidul Haque, Faiz Ahmed, Ahmed Rafiq, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Dr. Mazharul Islam, Professor Abu Jafar, Sector Commander of the Liberation War Colonel (Rtd.) Abu Osman Chowdhury, S A M S

Kibria, Professor Abu Sayeed, Syed Hasan Imam, Professor Abdul Mannan Chowdhury, editor of *The Daily Janakantha* Atiqullah Khan Masud, Dr. Syed Modasser Ali, and others. Everyone voted to support the Awami League's ongoing movement on the question of the caretaker government. However, any meeting of the Awami League with the Jamaat or JP was criticized and thought to be detrimental to the former. Rather, the Awami League should immediately tear apart the web of conspiracy and remove itself from any association with the fundamentalists and opponents of the Liberation War to focus strongly on publicly exhibiting their primary political goals. Otherwise, this same Jamaat would be instrumental in spreading rumors about the Awami League at home and abroad, openly and in secret. One of the points raised was regarding the expectations that the masses had from the Awami League. The nation, however, had no such expectations from the BNP.

S A M S Kibria Shaheb, however, did try to explain that in a parliamentary system, this was natural but he too understood that there was a conspiracy. His family too were upset about this meeting with Jamaat, but he had to do it for the sake of his party. He blamed some advisors for this state of affairs at the Awami League.

To those assembled at the meeting, he said, "Those of you who have expressed concern about a rift in our party should convey their worries to our leader. So, if you are fond of our leader or respect her, do express those concerns right away."

After the meeting, the responsibility of arranging a meeting with the leader was given to Dr. Syed Modasser Ali. The very next day we were informed that we were scheduled to meet Sheikh Hasina at Minto Road on 11 July at 5 pm. Notable people who attended the meeting that day were poet Shamsur Rahman, journalist Obaidul Haque, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid, Profesor Zillur Rahman Siddique, Dr. Mazharul Islam, Justice K M Sobhan, architect Mazharul Islam, Kalim Sharafi, Dr. Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir, Dr. Syed Modasser Ali, Sector Commander Col. (Rtd.) Abu Osman Chowdhury, and Professor Abu Jafar. There were some others too. Besides Sheikh Hasina, there were also Awami League's working committee member and General Secretary Zillur Rahman, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Amir Hossain Amu, Begum Sajeda Chowdhury, Tofael Ahmed, Mohammad Nasim, Abdur Razzak, Abdul Mannan, Abdus Salam Azad, Sudhanshu Shekhar Halder, S A M S Kibria, Professor Abu Sayeed, Ivy Rahman, Monaem Sarker, Kader Siddique (Bir Uttam), Mozaffar Hossain Paltu, etc. We all took our seats.

I had made some notes which I now distributed among the group. First, the Chairperson welcomed us. Then Awami League leader Amir Hossain Amu gave us a detailed lecture on the current political scenario and the state of the parliament as well as the mass movement. He endorsed this involvement of the intellectuals positively and we were duly pleased.

I spoke first on behalf of our group: "Our expectations are that the Awami League will travel this path alone. This is not unreasonable for us to expect. Everyone, including us, supports the movement concerning the caretaker government. However, we do not believe you need to continue the movement with the help of Jamaat. So we hope that you will make the right decision in this regard."

The discussion continued in this vein. And then, senior leader Abdus Samad Azad began an explanatory monologue which was very formal and a repetition of the commonly held views. In his long speech, he highlighted the logic of having the Jamaat and JP in the parliament and that the opposition party's unity regarding the caretaker government was reasonable. He also said, "This is not an understanding at all. It is simply a temporary tactical union."

At that moment, unable to take this any longer, Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid stood up and said, “Samad Shaheb, we haven’t come here to listen to your monologue. Each of us is here because we are well-wishers of the Awami League. What you have done in the parliament wasn’t a good idea at all. We did not expect this from the Awami League.”

Then Abdul Mannan, a senior leader of the Awami League who had been part of Mushtaq’s cabinet after the murder of Bangabandhu, stood up and said, “Whatever Awami League has done in the present circumstances is right.” He wanted to stop Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid, but the latter refused to stop. He continued, “I’m an elderly professor and I can confidently state that you are not guiding Awami League in the right direction. We cannot imagine Awami League without its uncompromising ideals of the Liberation War.”

His strong stance left Mannan Shaheb no option but to sit down.

At one point, a comment slipped out from a senior leader: “Just when we reach closer to power, some people stand in the way with their talk of ethics.”

I noticed that in the midst of all this talk, Sheikh Hasina had remained silent. With a calm, grave face, she sat listening to what everyone was saying.

Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid addressed Sheikh Hasina directly, “Hasina, you will go to power. You don’t need to compromise with these fundamentalists and opposition forces. Your father was Bangabandhu. He never compromised. You don’t need to either.”

I have seen very few such honest and direct men in my life and that is why I will never forget Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid.

Finally, Sheikh Hasina reassured us that Awami League would prove through the mass movement whether it was compromising or not. In the question of the ideals of the Liberation War, there would be no concession. The intellectuals expressed their faith in her after this.

After that meeting, we sat down to another discussion ourselves. Quite a number of people felt that whatever contact had been made with the Jamaat had not been done with Sheikh Hasina’s consent and she didn’t like it either. Those who had initiated the contact had, for twenty years after ’75, practiced fundamentalism and propagated a distorted history. Perhaps, due to desperation at the state of things, this political tactic had been selected. However, after that meeting, we were almost sure that Awami League would walk alone. Being able to go and present our case freely to the leader had served to reassure us about our beliefs.

I was in Jessore now. I was going door to door day, in and day out. Everyone said the same thing: bring your nomination and we’ll all support you. Then I heard that Mohammad Nasim was coming to Jessore. When he came, we all went to the airport.

The sculptor Rasha used to come to our office frequently these days. He was interested in making a sculpture of Bangabandhu. I had a discussion and we all decided that the sculpture would be based on the lifesize picture of him giving his speech on 7 March. I thought it would be best to get Sheikh Hasina’s opinion on this. The journalists Mesbah, Faruk, and Bakar went to discuss the issue with Sheikh Hasina at her home. She said, “When Bangabandhu’s smiling sculpture is completed, Sheikh Rehana will inaugurate it.”

Happily, I asked Rasha to begin work. Rasha said he couldn't do two things at the same time. So I said, "Fine. First do the smiling Bangabandhu sculpture."

The sculpture would be a bust. I told Rasha that he could do it with cast iron. He said, "It will cost more." I replied that a sculpture made of cast iron would last a thousand years, but he would have to make the top layer with copper. The work began in front of the *Ajker Kagoj* building and, at one point, it was finished. Victory Day was celebrated in the premises of *Ajker Kagoj* from 1 to 16 December, it was decided that that inauguration of Bangabandhu's bust would take place then.

2 December 1995 was the date we decided on. Sheikh Rehana was supposed to be present as the Chief Guest to inaugurate the bust, so we printed and distributed invitation cards to all the important people accordingly. I have no clue what happened but Sheikh Rehana had gone off to Tungipara, and many of the invited guests had started to arrive at the venue.

I was, of course, not one to back down. So the large sculpture of Bangabandhu giving his March speech in 1971 was made. The entire speech had been inscribed on a marble tablet and the second sculpture was positioned above it. This was installed on my one bigha plot of land in Savar.

The famous writer, Annada Shankar Ray from West Bengal, had come as Chief Guest for the 1995 Victory Day celebration. He was effusive in his praise on seeing the bust of Bangabandhu. When he heard it was made of cast iron, he said, "You did the right thing. Our soil is alluvial. Whatever stands on this soil today will disappear within the next five hundred years."

Later, though, Awami League leaders had taken replicas of this sculpture and it made me happy. Some, of course, had disapproved because, for every work done, there are always people who praise and those who criticize. The best way to remain all this is to do nothing at all in life.

I went to Jessore because I was pushed and persuaded. Awami League, in the meantime, had refused to join the Parliament for some time now and was even protesting on the streets. Dhaka was in a tumultuous uproar. Khaled Zia, on the other hand, was adamant that the elections should be held on time. Someone came in from Australia and a couple of others from the Commonwealth. They tried to negotiate, but to no avail. All the parties rejected the Parliament now. Their demand: a caretaker government. The only party left in the Parliament was the government party, BNP. Time passed by. Khaleda Zia rejected every move towards a compromise and, on 15 February 1996, she held a one-party election. Naturally, all the seats went to her party. One seat, though, was given to Colonel Rashid, one of the killers of Bangabandhu.

The opposition parties, particularly the Awami League, refused to leave the arena. The other parties joined AL on the streets. With neither the government nor the opposition ready to budge, things came to a standstill. The *Ajker Kagoj* office, though, was always filled with people, including intellectuals. In fact, some government Secretaries came too in the dead of night. I made some phone calls when this happened and told Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun, Barrister Amirul Islam, and Justice K M Sobhan. I said, "Considering this crisis in our country, everyone wants a meeting to take place together. What do you all say?"

Everyone said the same thing: they were with me. Finally, Barrister Amir said, "If you call them, everyone will come. You do it."

So I did. I called everyone up myself. On 28 February 1996, a meeting was held at the *Ajker Kagoj* building. That evening, one by one, there came the poet Shamsur Rahman, Dr. Kazi Shahidul Alam, Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Dr. Razib Humayun, Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Dr. Nilima

Ibrahim, Shah A M S Kibria, Justice Debesh Chandra Bhattacharya, Dr. Durgadas Bhattacharya, Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, poet Begum Sufia Kamal, Principal Ahad Chowdhury, Major Nasir Uddin, Khandakar Mazharul Karim, Swapan Kumar Sarker, Selina Akhtar Jahan, Ratan Tanu Ghosh, Shamsul Arefin, Md. Abdul Malek, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Siddiqur Rahman, Asaduzzaman Asad, Barrister Amirul Islam, Abdul Awwal (Maulana), Akbar Qureshi, A T M Shamsul Haque, Mustafa Sarwar, Ataur Rahman, M Mohiuddin, Lutfor Rahman Riton, Nikhil Chakraborty, Jibon Chowdhury, Alhaj Syed Abul Hossain, Dr. Syed Modasser Ali, Syed Shamsul Huq, Brig. Anwarul Azim Mollick, Colonel Abu Osman Chowdhury, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, Subrata Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan Chowdhury of the Muktijoddha Shangsad, Shahriar Kabir, Professor Panna Kaiser, Kalim Sharafi, Fakir Alamgir, Ziauddin Tarek, Kazi Nabil Ahmed, Abdul Matin Khan, Mohammed Ashrab Ali, Md. Lutfor Rahman, Md. Hossain, Sudhir Kumar Robi, S K Biswas, Khondoker Shahinul Haque, Iqbal Hossain Patwary, Md. Abul Kashem, Abu Sayeed Betar, Shah Mozammel Huq, etc.

We sat in a line downstairs. Before the discussion began, I had a couple of things to say: “Everyone wants to come together on one platform to do something about the current crisis in the country. The people want relief from this situation. They are looking for a way out. The people want an election, a fair one. Now, you may each state your opinion, particularly how this country and its people can be relieved from this problem. This meeting is open to everyone.”

When I finished speaking, the first person to talk was Justice Debesh Chandra Bhattacharya. He was followed by, more or less, everyone in the meeting. Several of the discussants suggested that we could and should hold another meeting on a larger scale. Suggestions came for a press release about that day’s meeting to be sent to the papers. The meeting went on from 5 pm till late at night. The decision taken at this meeting was that an organization for the reestablishment of democracy and human rights be formed.

To this end, 3 March, 5 pm, was set for a meeting on the premises of *Ajker Kagoj*. The decision was also made to form a formal committee at that meeting for the new organization. The meeting was chaired by the well-known educator, Professor Zillur Rahman Siddique, and so, on 28 February, we were able to take several steps towards achieving our goal.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t be a part of this later on. From 29 February, I had to go into hiding to avoid arrest. Dr. Nilima Ibrahim wrote an article which we published in the 26 February 1996 edition of *Ajker Kagoj*. The title of her article was “O Ma, Where can I go?” In it, she had talked about the how the armed forces had aided the election and were still abetting. I am quoting a few lines from that article here. The Army Chief at the time was a freedom fighter and this was addressed to him: “Honorable Chief of Army, our expectations from you are like those from a freedom fighter. The then Prime Minister had a police force but they failed because they took bribes. The Election Commissioner requested you to support this one-party election and you instantly came forward to do your duty. You have hurt us by aiding a one-party lying woman. The Bangladesh Army is our pride and we salute you for liberating our country. So, I beg of you, do not snatch away our innermost good wishes.”

This article was not really dangerous but people get upset sometimes even though they can’t take action right away. However, they do decide to retaliate later when the time is right. Likewise, their anger towards me festered until “O Ma, Where can I go?” was published and they found something to hit back at.

This article was really just an excuse. It was Thursday, 29 February. Around eight or eight-thirty in the evening, I received a call. From the other end, I was asked, “Are you Kazi Shahid Ahmed?”

I replied, “Yes, speaking.”

Another question: “Are you the editor?”

“Yes, I am.”

Immediately, a warning: “You’re going to be arrested and tortured. Run now if you can.” Then the line went dead.

I get phone calls like this by the thousands. I tend to step on people’s tails and that’s when I get calls like this. Others call because they feel like it. But still, after this call, I made a move and unhurriedly returned home. Someone was with me, but I sent him away. I sat with Nabil, Inam, and Ameenah to discuss everything in detail. Anis was away in America at the time doing his Masters. If I tried to run away, there was the fear of getting caught. So we decided that I would hide at home. I would hide in a closet but the doors would remain slightly open so that it didn’t appear as though I might be hiding inside.

It grew late, eleven at night, but there was no sign of anyone. Nabil and Inam went to bed. Ameenah had had heart surgery just a few days ago. She was not feeling well and couldn’t stay awake any longer. So she went to bed too. I waited, thinking I would do so for a little bit longer. The phone rang at midnight. It was Borhan Kabir on the other end. He said, “Shahid Bhai, the police have surrounded me – they said they are taking me away.”

I said, “What will you do now?”

Borhan replied, “I’ve told them clearly that I won’t leave until the paper is ready.”

He was taken to the Dhanmondi Police Station around 2.30 am after the pasting was done. The article for which a case of treason was filed against us and for which Borhan was arrested was titled “Army Acknowledges Inability to do their Duty at Parliamentary Elections.” This report was published on 29 January but the case was filed a month later, on 29 February.

I told Borhan not to worry, but he said it was his wife who was anxious. After I hung up, I called Borhan’s wife, Molly, and said, “Don’t worry. We will take care of everything.”

A short while after this, around 1.30 am, I looked out of the window of our home at Road 2/A and saw that we were surrounded by men in black uniforms, and some in white. I knew they were here.

They also came inside. They had come fully prepared – with the keys to every lock in the building. They unlocked the gate to each floor and beat up the guard. In this manner, they climbed up to the fourth floor. I had warned Nabil and Inam that if anyone knocked, they should wait a bit, but not too long, before opening the door. Otherwise, they might break the door down. They wouldn’t find it easy to break it down though. I woke Ameenah up gently and said, “Don’t wake up – pretend that you’re very ill and can’t open your eyes. I’m not at home.”

Then I disappeared. I watched, though, as about a hundred policemen, members of the SB, and some other kinds of people stormed the house, waking everyone up. In that sprawling four-story building, each family lived on a different floor. My mother-in-law was on the first floor; Ameenah’s eldest brother, Rezaul Huq, on the second; younger brother, Ehsanul Huq, on the third floor; and we were on the fourth. They searched everywhere and grew restless. The phone was ringing off the hook. They guessed that I must be hiding somewhere in the building, because plainclothes policemen had kept watch since evening, so there was no way for anyone to leave without being seen. They searched through the night, until finding no one, they left at dawn.

The next day, Friday, at the time of Jummah, I left the house by the back, climbed over our wall and the back wall of the neighboring house, went through the front gate of that second house and got in a car. Reza, my older brother-in-law, was the one who got me out. Reza was at the wheel while I sat with a newspaper spread out in front of me so my face was not visible. We arrived at a house in Monipuri Para. A ten-by-ten foot room on the second floor was ready for me.

The homeowner, his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and grandson lived on the first floor. They were relatives of Reza's in-laws. It takes a very sympathetic and brave man to give shelter to someone that the government was desperately looking for. I cannot express in words how my family and I are indebted to them. They were extremely good people, especially Khalamma, the homeowner's wife. His daughter-in-law was also very kind-hearted. For the one month I stayed with them, I saw no sign of irritation among them. My food would be brought to me on the third floor everyday on time. Tea would be brought up in a flask and I would drink from it all day. I would lay two cushions down and do my exercises, army-style, within the walls of that ten-by-ten room. I asked for some paper to write on and this book was started at that time. Even though I couldn't go out, I stayed up to date through the papers. Two days after I went into hiding, Faruk Shaheb picked up my papers from the court and went to meet Advocate Mahbubey Alam, who sat there, dumbstruck, after going through those papers. Then, leaning slowly back in his chair, he asked Faruk, "Where is Shahid Bhai now?" Faruk Shaheb said he didn't know. Then Mahbubey Alam told him, "Don't let Shahid Bhai get caught. Try to get him out of the country somehow. Under the Bangladesh Penal Code 124(a)/505/505(a), the OC of Dhanmondi Police Station, Nur Ahmed, as plaintiff, filed a case at the Dhaka CMM Court on 29 February 1996. He is charged under the same law for two counts of treason."

Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, though, had been released on bail for this same case on 4 March 1996. In describing the case, Mahbubey Alam said, "I have never seen anyone charged under this section of the Penal Code before, but the consequences are terrible." After Faruk Shaheb returned from his visit to Mahbubey Alam and reported everything to Nabil, I got to know the situation.

It would be near impossible for me to remain in hiding in Dhaka city with such a case against me because the police and SB had been going door to door to both Ameenah's and my relatives and our friends. The police suspected I might be hiding out either in the Indian High Commission or the British Embassy in Dhaka.

While I was in hiding, Hasan managed to cleverly smuggle a mobile phone of his friend's to me. This became my only means of communication during this time, although I didn't make any calls and received them rarely.

From the papers, I learned that a new meeting had been held on 3 March where a few new faces joined. The newcomers included: Abir Ahad, Mohammed Sadek, Rafiq Islam, Dipankar Pal, Md. Nasir Uddin (Income Tax Advisor), Kazi Hasan, Major (Rtd.) Siddik, Major (Rtd.) Mohammed Rezaul Karim (Reza), Anwar Alam Khan, Commando Md. Khalilur Rahman, A S H K Sadek, Advocate Delwar Hossain Bhuiyan, Dr. A T M Imdadul Haque, Tarek Ali, Faruk Ahmed, Dr. Quayyum Laskar, Mesbah Uddin Ahmed, Dr. Mazharul Islam, Ameenah Ahmed, Sukesh Chandra Deb, Dr. Md. Jamal Uddin Chowdhury, Aslam Sani, Salam Azad, Syed Zakir Hossain, Leena Habib, Syed Hasan Imam, Enamul Haque Chowdhury, Swapan Kumar Sarker, Ratan Debnath, Jahidul Haque Selim, Shamsuddin Chowdhury, etc.

About a hundred and one people were present. The demand was reiterated to renounce the absurd election held on15 February and to immediately hold another non-partisan, free and fair, election under a caretaker

government where the democratic participation of all parties should be ensured. The unconditional release of the following was also demanded: editor of *The Daily Ittefaq* Anwar Hossain Manju; Alhaj Mokbul Hossain of *The Daily Al Ameen*; and chief reporter of *Ajker Kagoj* Syed Borhan Kabir. The demand to withdraw the arrest warrants and treason charges against elderly academician Dr. Nilima Ibrahim and me was also made.

A formal Citizens' Committee was to be formed and the discussion went on till late at night. They decided to reconvene on 5 March at the *Ajker Kagoj* premises.

Everyone returned to join the meeting on 5 March. Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Kalim Sharafi, Monaem Sarker, and Dr. Syed Modasser Ali also joined in. Our numbers remained, more or less, a 100 to 105. Even though this was the third meeting, they gave the meeting a name with full consensus: "Discussion Meeting on the Current Political Crisis and the Protest of Poets, Writers, Artistes, Journalists, and Intellectuals against the Ruling Party's Unfair Harrassment." A decision was made at this meeting to hold a citizens' meeting with the leading citizens and intellectuals of the country at the Central Shahid Minar on Friday, 8 March at 4 pm. People from all over the country would be invited to join in.

A wonderful meeting took place on 8 March at the Central Shahid Minar where people joined in enthusiastically. The ruling party's foundation had already been shaken. This meeting served to heighten their anxiety. Eight demands were made from that citizens' meeting that day, among which the most significant were: resolve the political and constitutional crisis in the country; create a resistance against all communal, fundamentalist, and anti-independence entities; create a modern democracy with a non-communal, progressive social system. To fulfill these demands and with the aim of finally toppling the government, a non-cooperation movement was declared from 9 March and each sector of the society was asked to support this. The citizens' committee also expressed its solidarity with this movment, which lasted until 29 March.

It was from this time that a free citizens' platform was established in front of the Press Club. Those who had joined in the discussion meetings at *Ajker Kagoj* on the 28th, 3rd, 5th, and 8th were the ones who wanted to play the organizers' role in establishing the Citizens' Platform. Shahriar Kabir was one of the best organizers here, along with others. We had invited the mayor of Dhaka City, Hanif Shaheb to every meeting and called him on the phone, he never came. But when he saw how impactful the Citizens' Platform had been, he appeared on the scene. He had a good voice and spoke well, so people liked him. In fact, several Secretaries from the Secretariat eagerly joined him on the platform.

Eventually, on 30 March, a letter asking permission to dissolve the parliament was sent to the President. That night at 9.30 pm, the President appointed Former Chief Justice Habibur Rahman Shelly as the new Advisor to the caretaker government. So the caretaker government was formed. An election would be held. That was the end of Khaleda Zia's government – and I, after 31 days in hiding, left my asylum on 31 March and went directly to the *Ajker Kagoj* office at 4 pm. Everyone came to meet and talk to me there until evening.

The next day, 1 April, after receiving bail from the High Court, I came to *Ajker Kagoj* from where my colleagues took me to the Citizens' Platform. I ended up giving a long speech there where I made people laugh and also talked about the future. Mayor Hanif was present too. I could clearly foresee that Awami League was strong enough to take on the election by itself and go to power.

Chapter Forty-two

The Politics of Elections – The Conclusion

I went to Jessore and had a wonderful time, touring and meeting the people. They were all very happy and wanted me to run for office from that area. They would all vote for me. In the meantime, Ali Reza Raju of Jessore, who until even three months ago, was openly making fun of Bangabandhu in his speeches, met the Awami League General Secretary, Zillur Rahman with flowers, shook hands, and joined the party. Sharif Abdur Rakib remained an adversary. He, with Abdur Razzak of Jessore and Raushan Ali's oldest son, Feroz, formed a group. The election drew closer and everyone, including me, submitted applications for nominations. But I wasn't feeling too happy.

One day, without any warning, Mohua appeared. I welcomed her heartily and offered every hospitality, talking to her as a brother would with a sister. During our conversation, she dragged in the subject of nominations. My nomination was guaranteed but there were some costs and I needed to initially give thirty lakh taka.

When you're in politics, all kinds of people will approach you, while familiar people will assume unfamiliar faces. When I'm in Dhaka, I regularly take an evening walk. My path passed through Road 32. One such evening, I suddenly spied a very distant cousin sister of mine coming out with Mohua. As soon as I greeted Bubu, her sister behind her cried out, "What's this? Don't you know me?" Surprised, I looked to see the sister, who was two years younger than me and used to be a pain in her youth, addressing me informally as "tui," not respectfully as "apni". When did I become such to her? Her next words, though, clarified everything.

"I heard you're going into politics! You'll get a nomination, become an MP or minister. Listen, the leader is my class friend. I will shred you to bits when I talk to her. I'll see how you get a nomination. I will make you cry."

I have never cared about threats. In fact, if anyone threatened me, I grew more determined. I said, "Do whatever you can. I don't care."

It soon became time for the nominations. I was even called in for an interview. Sheikh Hasina and a group of panelists were conducting the interviews. Except for the big guns, most of the applicants had faced this interview. In fact, even A S H K Sadek from Jessore had been here. When it was our turn, five of us presented ourselves: me, Rakib, Razzak, Feroz, and Raju. As soon as we sat in front of the board, Sheikh Hasina said, "Go outside and select one person from your group after discussion. That person will come back in."

Rakib said to me, "A special childhood friend of yours doesn't want you to get a nomination. She has called up the leader and asked her not to select you."

I said, "Perhaps – probably because I helped her out once." I said nothing more and left. The next day, the nominations were announced and we discovered that Ali Reza Raju had got it. We were all shocked and speechless. I was very hurt and angry that day. Why had Sheikh Hasina ask me to enter politics one day and then why did she deprive me of a nomination? I couldn't understand it at all.

Dr. Rafiqul Islam and Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun came to see me. Dr. Rafiq scolded me a little.

"You wasted your time and your money. You went into this for nothing."

Dr. Harun was a calm, quiet man. He said, “Perhaps next time. Don’t lose hope. But it’s now up to us to make sure that Awami League wins by any means.”

Despite my own humiliation and sorrow, I couldn’t disagree with what he said. Every bit of my effort and thought had gone into trying to recover the ideals of the Liberation War; to show my respects towards the memory of Bangabandhu. If the party didn’t win, none of this would remain.

The election was held and Awami League formed the government. Despite being deprived, my heart filled with joy. I felt as though we had achieved victory anew, as though our Bangladesh had been returned to us after ’75.

Chapter Forty-three

At the Tomb of Bangabandhu with the Intellectuals

1996. Pro-independence Awami League had ascended to power. Everyone was in good spirits. Awami League had formed a government after a long period of twenty-one years. Bangabandhu's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, was the Prime Minister. There was no reason not to be happy. No one expected too much, but, naturally, there were still some expectations. *Ajker Kagoj* often had discussions about this. Many came to take part: Shawkat Osman, Nilima Ibrahim, Professor Momtaz Uddin, Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Siddikur Rahman, Khandaker Mazharul Karim, and others. They all repeated the same thing: no one had been able to pay tribute to Bangabandhu at his tomb. No one had taken them or they had never had a chance to. I thought it was unfair to leave such a wish unfulfilled, and so I took it on myself to make their wish come true.

We decided to visit Tungipara on 23 August 1996. A microbus was rented from the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation. I sent a letter notifying everyone that before our journey, there would be breakfast at the *Ajker Kagoj* office and, later, on the bus. We would have a substantial meal after we got on the ship at Aricha. There would be fresh hilsha from the Padma that would be cooked on board. Then, as we rocked along, we would eat that Padma ilish with fresh, hot rice. This, in short, was the message in the invitation. Lots of people were happy to receive this letter while others laughed. Interestingly, I really enjoy it if anyone makes fun of me. I don't like to see people cry. Why should anyone cry? Why should I ever do anything that would make others cry? So whatever I do should make people happy, bring them joy. This was my life's philosophy.

One by one, on the 23rd, they came: Shawkat Osman; Dr. Nilima Ibrahim; Dr. Ibrahim; Momtaz Uddin Ahmed; Dr. Rafiqul Islam; Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun; Kamal Lohani; Santosh Gupta; Shamsuzzaman Khan; diplomat Mohiuddin Ahmed; the Chief Engineer-Founder of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, Sharfuzzaman; columnist Siddikur Rahman; columnist Khandaker Mazharul Karim and his wife, writer Mila Mahfuza; along with me and some others. The group on this pilgrimage consisted of thirty members (among these, Shawkat Osman, Nilima Ibrahim, Santosh Gupta, Siddikur Rahman, and Khandaker Mazharul Karim all passed away in the next few years).

The bus started off at 6.45 am from in front of the *Ajker Kagoj* office. Shawkat Osman Shaheb had not been well for the last few days and neither had Mrs. Nilima Ibrahim. But apparently, Shawkat Osman had called and woken up several people since 4.30 in the morning to say that the *Ajker Kagoj* bus was on its way and that he was going. I felt how strong-willed this man was and how brave – even at eighty years of age! Kamal Lohani Shawkat Osman, and Siddikur Rahman came together. I had sent a separate car to pick up Dr. Nilima Ibrahim. She and Shawkat Osman were selfless followers of Bangabandhu and truly loved him. These two people had never, even in their minds, veered in their valuation of the Liberation War or of Bangabandhu. I have always seen high tide in them.

Shawkat Osman Bhai, Momtaz Bhai, and I kept our fellow travelers entertained the whole way. We were joined by the intelligent humor of Dr. Rafiqul Islam and Dr. Nilima Ibrahim. In this mood, we soon reached the ferry landing.

Once we crossed, there were arrangements for us to rest in Gopalganj. We arrived at the Gopalganj Circuit House around 1.30 pm. The Circuit House was a modern structure built to suit its beautiful natural surroundings. We were welcomed by the Deputy Commissioner, Salauddin Shaheb; Additional District Magistrate, Abdur Razzak; a top level police officer; the District General Secretary of Awami League,

Sheikh Abdullah; Organizing Secretary, Mahbub Ali; and Social Welfare Secretary, Salauddin Panna. Tea and talk made the environment quite festive. After we rested, we resumed our journey towards Tungipara at 2.30 pm. On the way, we stopped at Gimadanga village where my sister's husband, Colonel Sheikh Abdur Rahman's family had arranged for us to have lunch. We had to detour from the main road and travel by a mud road to their home. It was quite far – but, as the roads were muddy, the cars couldn't drive through them, so we had to walk. It wasn't possible for Shawkat Osman and Nilima Ibrahim to walk, so I found them a rickshaw van to travel by. The locals called them "helicopters." While the two of them rode the van, we all walked behind them to Colonel Rahman's home.

On the veranda of the concrete building, a long table and benches had been placed so that we could sit and eat. Momtaz Shaheb sat near the kitchen. As one by one the dishes emerged from the kitchen, Momtaz Bhai let out a shout, "Beware! Here comes some koi fish. Beware! Here comes some fish heads." I had no clue that so many types of foods would be served here, even though this was my sister's husband's home.

After lunch, Shawkat Osman and Nilima Ibrahim were helped back on to the rickshaw van and we finally reached Bangabandhu's tomb at almost 4 pm. When I had visited here previously, the Bangali king of the cowherds, Bangabandhu's grave had been surrounded by a bamboo fence. After Sheikh Hasina returned to the country, she had the grave covered in a layer of marble. Bangabandhu's parents' graves were nearby. It looked as though the father and mother were keeping watch over the Khoka. Some people began crying as they stood before the grave; some collected handfuls of earth to keep as a souvenir; others sat down, hands on the grave. Finally, at one point, we all said a prayer together. After completing the ritual, we all sat down. A sudden silence had descended among us and we became still for a time. This silence was horrific. When one stands next to Bangabandhu's grave, the grief we feel seems to spread through every leaf on every tree, in the songs of the birds, and in the sky and air. It awakens a sense of helplessness. Some grass in the middle of the grave seemed to declare Bangabandhu's deep connection with the greenery and nature of Bengal.

After our prayers, we held a discussion meeting. Locals attended the meeting. The first speaker was Khandaker Mazharul Karim. He described in summary the horrific, heartwrenching murder of Bangabandhu and demanded that the self-identified killers should be brought to justice.

Then Siddikur Rahman spoke: "Bangabandhu came from the roots, that is, the field level to establish a nation. There is no other example of this."

Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun said, "The Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu, has risen like a phoenix and returned from the ashes of the Bangali nation." He called this journey here a "political pilgrimage."

Shamsuzzaman Khan said, "There are nearly fifty ethnic groups, including Bangalis, in the Indian subcontinent. But only the Bangali ethnic group has been successful in establishing an independent state. The credit for this belongs to Bangabandhu alone. So, he will remain not only the greatest Bangali in the thousand year history of Bengal, but in all of the subcontinent."

The meeting was chaired by the local Awami League leader, Laiq Ali. When it was my turn, I said, "Bangabandhu was a large-hearted man with a mighty personality. *Ajker Kagoj* will continue to uphold the four basic principles of democracy, independence, Muktijuddho, and secularism to help realize Bangabandhu's dream for this nation."

The next morning, on the 24th at 8 am, we boarded our minibus and headed back to Dhaka. Not too long after we started, the bus broke down along the banks of the Madhumati River. Colonel Rahman hitched a ride with a motorcyclist on his way to Gopalganj, rented a bus, and returned to pick us up. Four hours had passed in the meantime, but no one expressed any irritation at this. After this, though, we reached the ferry without incident. On the ferry, we had a meal of steaming rice with Padma ilish.

We had fulfilled our expectations and excitement on this trip. So, on the way back, everyone relaxed. We reached Dhaka at 8 pm, all in good health. Siddikur Rahman described his emotions about this pilgrimage in the following way: “I think that had we not gone to Tungipara, had we not seen the sacred land of the Bangalis, had we not touched the earth of the grave in which lies Bangabandhu’s mortal remains, our understanding of the word ‘independence’ would have remained incomplete.”

Chapter Forty-four

The Final Chapter of Politics and a New Chapter in Business

Time went on. It is human nature to forget. I, too, am human, and time was passing for me. One afternoon, in 1997, the Jessore General Secretary of Awami League, Rakib, came to the office of *Ajker Kagoj*. His wife, MP Aleya, was with him. They had come to state that they had made a monumental mistake last time, that I should forgive them all, and go back to Jessore. After two hours of pressure, I asked, "What do the other leaders have to say?"

Rakib said, "Everyone is of the same opinion."

One by one, others came and said that the Awami League was non-existent in Jessore under Raju's leadership. For him, there were only his BNP guides and his other followers.

After mulling over this for a while, I finally set foot in Jessore towards the tail end of 1997. And when I did, I swept through the entire place with everyone else. A microbus stood behind us, but we walked two hundred, five hundred, a thousand miles, while the bus followed. The number of kilometers rose and I ended up walking eight thousand kilometers. Everyone from two to eighty year olds came to know me. Every house and shop had a calendar hanging with my face on it. I distributed almost five lakh calendars. A two and half year old child pointed me out to his mother and said with his half-formed words, "Ma, you must vote for this man. He is a good man." Everyone laughed.

It was time for the elections. This time, I presented myself at Sheikh Hasina's home the day before the nominations were approved. Sitting in her living room on the second floor, I asked for my nomination in every way possible. The leader, after an hour and a half, left me without saying yes or no; but I didn't get the nomination. I hadn't actually expected to get it this time though. But I had given my word to many people that I would run for office, so, even without the boat backing me, I decided to run on my own. Seniors, however, said, "Bring your symbol and take your vote."

The election took place. I went to a few voting centers by road and saw my flag flying on the rickshaws, cars, bullock carts. I asked a few people who they had voted for. They replied, "We voted for you with the boat symbol." Others said angrily, "You didn't get the symbol, so we voted for the sheaf of paddy."

Immediately, I realized what was happening. They knew me and they knew the boat. So they had voted for the boat for me. If the ballot papers had my picture on them instead of the boat symbol, I would have received eighty percent of the vote.

The results started coming in by evening. Nabil asked, "Abbu, will we be humiliated?"

I replied, "There is nothing called respectability in politics. And I am an independent candidate. Let's see how many votes I get."

Up until morning, the count for me was around twenty thousand votes. Tariqul received 146,000, Raju got 110,000. It was all a game of symbols. Still, I had been surprised that I received votes from thousands of people even without a symbol. I wondered who had voted for me and why!

I went to Tariqul's home in the morning. I congratulated him and told him to take care of Jessore. He was very happy. In the afternoon, I called a press conference and declared my loss. This marked the culmination of my active participation in politics. The news was published the following day and I returned to Dhaka.

However, I still had one unanswered question. I got a chance to find out the answer after a long time though. I ran into Hasina at an informal gathering one day. Even though she refused me a nomination twice, she had never shut her door to me. In fact, she would listen to my simple words with interest. So, I just had to ask her, "Why did you cut me down to size like this?"

In reply, she said, "You don't listen to instructions or abide by them." Her words surprised me. At first, I wondered how that could possibly be. All I ever thought about was the Liberation War and Bangabandhu. Later, though, I remembered that I was an enterprising man and I often ended up doing other things. But if one wanted to be part of party politics, one had to be able to get along with many kinds of people. It could be that I had done things unknowingly that had created awkward situations for the top level people.

With time, I discovered that even if Sheikh Hasina did not want me in politics, she had never refused to see me whenever I asked for an audience with her. As an individual, I have always received only pleasantness from her. She guides such a large party that I'm sure she knows who is capable of what. Perhaps she had actually done me a favor by not letting me get involved in politics. So, from the year 2000, I returned to my business affairs with renewed vigor and, through them, I focused on social development.

At this point, I started several new projects. First, in 2000, I began the Kazi and Kazi Tea Estate in Panchagarh. This project, too, was inspired by Sheikh Hasina. She had visited Panchagarh and said, "There are tea estates on the other side of the border, that is, in India. Why shouldn't we have them here too?" Based on those words, the DC at the time, Rabiul Hussain, approached me and I, too, accepted the challenge. Today that tea is sold at the world-famous Harrod's under the brand name of Teatulia. This tea from Bangladesh is also available at almost 1500 branches of Target, one of the largest supermarket chains in America.

In 2002, I launched Meena Bazaar. To create a modernized outlet for farm produce, to be able to give both farmers and customers a reasonable price for the goods, and to ensure food safety, there is no alternative to cold-chain reliant modern trade. Gradually, Meena Bazaar has expanded to include 18 outlets. Two more stores will be opened soon. Every year, there will be more outlets, but in a country of 16 million people, these numbers do not count for much. When three or four large chain supermarkets with several hundred outlets are opened and when there are about a hundred regional and specialized outlets, then only will the chain-reliant production be successful.

In 2003, I started the first largest jute mill of North Bengal in Panchagarh. Many scratched their heads at the idea of a jute mill while others rolled their eyes when they heard about Panchagarh. And yet, that mill employs about three thousand workers today and it is making profit. Whether they followed our example or not, there are currently almost fifty small or medium-sized jute mills in operation in North Bengal. In fact, jute is also being farmed now in that area.

I may have moved away from politics but I remained close to the people through my various projects. Towards the beginning of 2002, I had applied for permission to start a private university. My businesses had brought me much profit. This would be a non-profit affair. I had only one intention here – providing quality education for the next generation, particularly with a liberal arts philosophy to give them a chance to develop open minds. It was the era of Khaleda Zia. After overcoming the multiple conflicts of the nineties, we had honored her with the position of Prime Minister. In return, she gave our paper and business group their due respect. Still, I had to wait a long year and a half before I finally got the permission in November 2003. Anis returned from the US in January 2004 after completing his PhD and I handed

over this project to him. Rafiq Bhai, that is, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, of course, was with him. He would oversee the development of the curriculum. Anis, too, would play other roles, but his main responsibility was administrative.

Within six months of Anis' return, Inam completed his graduation and came back. With my three sons at home, I started up a variety of new projects. Everything was exciting and meant to do good for others. Ameenah's health was in good condition. She seemed to ignore her old heart condition and kept herself busy with her music, meditation, and taking care of her large extended family as well as other unknown people. Everything was going well. The country was moving on too, but there was a rise in terrorist activities. This was a cause for worry, but that didn't mean things were in bad shape.

Accompanied by Ameenah now, I paid a visit to Sudha Sadan. Coincidentally, the day was 21 August 2004. We were there to meet Sheikh Rehana – nothing else – just to meet her. She was like a younger sister to me. We had taken her some organic vegetables from our garden as well as some herbal products and other gifts. We were chatting when Rehana saw our gifts. There was also a sari for her and one for Sheikh Hasina. She was very happy with the gifts.

Suddenly, sirens sounded and Sheikh Hasina arrived in her car with others following. It was then we heard a hullabaloo downstairs. We went down and heard that while speaking at a meeting on Bangabandhu Avenue, Sheikh Hasina had been attacked with a grenade. There were innumerable dead and injured. Sheikh Hasina had barely escaped with her life. Wazed Miah looked worried and upset.

The extent of the tragedy was not clear at that point. That moment had been a time of utter confusion. No one knew which way to go. Who was going to the hospital? Who was where? At one point, we left and came home. We were shocked to see and hear what happened from the TV and other media. Innumerable Awami League leaders and workers had been injured or killed. Hospitals all over the city were treating the injured. People were rushing to donate blood to the victims, but it was becoming very difficult to provide treatment to hundreds of people simultaneously. The next day, I went back to Sudha Sadan. Sheikh Hasina was downstairs. I handed her a large donation for the treatment of the injured in this grenade attack.

Even two days prior to this incident, I had thought the country was doing relatively okay and I was adjusting to it. But after this incident, it was difficult to accept that. I had seen Hindus being tortured in 2001 and I had to witness some more attacks by miscreants between 2001 and 2006. Those who had been defeated in '71 or their sympathizers were responsible for this. How did they dare to commit such an act?

It became imperative to get Awami League, Sheikh Hasina, back in power. If this is what she got for conceding the last time, then these enemies needed to be punished. We could not leave any stone unturned to prevent them from ever returning to power in an independent Bangladesh.

Chapter Forty-five

Final Words

I must tell you the history behind the writing and publication of this book. I was talking to Anis one day and I said, “It is now time for me to write about my life.”

He asked, “What will you write?”

“Why, just everything that happened.”

He asked again, “Why will you write it?”

“It’s my life’s story, an eyewitness’ account of history.”

He asked again, “Why will you write it?”

I replied, “It’s difficult to say. I notice a lot of things but no one ever pointed them out to me.”

“Like what?” asked Anis.

“You know, like how we had to stay in the Pakistani POW camps and did not speak up about it. We were labelled as ‘repatriates’ and we accepted it. We lived the life of animals in those places with barbed wire and machine guns pointed at us. We tolerated the injuries of war. Why shouldn’t we have received the respect due to us as POWs?”

Anis heard me out and said, “Okay. Write then. But keep your story within a frame.”

By now, I have developed several identities – businessman, newspaper publisher and editor, an individual always conscious about the ideals of the Liberation War. The “frame” that Anis prescribed was meant to encapsulate each of these identities, focusing on issues that readers may be curious about, so that each aspect was presented wholly.

I’m not a professional writer. It is difficult for me to present a coherent account of such a varied life with experiences in different arenas. Still, I hope I have brought forth many issues through which my readers can find answers to their questions, especially with regards to the rise of an entrepreneur. Money isn’t always everthing to a successful businessman, although that attitude is okay if the money is earned honestly. The values I was taught, from my grandfather and my father, have led me to develop a project such as the *Khoborer Kagoj* and *Ajker Kagoj*, not only with my hands, but with my heart.

I have achieved and accumulated much in my life. And, more than my success in business, my most important achievement is my beautiful family and the friendship, laughter, and stories we share with each other. More than fame, it is the love from others that is essential. Being able to help others and not forgetting those who helped me is important. But, despite having so much, some things have remained out of reach. This does not sadden me anymore. For instance, once, I had been very disappointed in not being able to become a politician. But where I couldn’t go, my son, Nabil, has. He is an MP now. Through him, I have been fulfilled. Some things, however, do pain me still. The most painful disappointment has been the fact that I did not receive my due respect as a POW. I had to live in a prison camp in Pakistan for almost three years with my family – my wife and my one year old son, Nabil. We lost contact with my son Anis because of our imprisonment. The 300 taka subsistence money we received did not allow us to eat more than half a meal twice a day. And we continued to be used as pawns by those who wished to protect the war criminals.

Towards the end of 2006, when we had grown restless from the rise of religious fundamentalism and hooliganism, the election created another point of contention. For some reason, BNP wouldn't hold the elections in a direct manner. They had taken full advantage of the 2001 election under the caretaker government system that had been generously agreed to by the Awami League. When it was their turn, though, they kept making excuses. And so, things went from bad to worse until an impossible situation merited, unsurprisingly, a state of emergency.

Final words are difficult to finish quickly, so I guess this chapter is growing longer.

After Moeen Uddin Ahmed became Chief of Army Staff, I sent him a letter of congratulations. That position had previously been held by Shafiullah, Zia, Ershad, Atiq, Nuruddin, Mustafiz, Nasim, Mahbub, Harun-Ar-Rashid, etc. During the Golf Championship dinner, I was seated next to Army Chief General Moeen. He used to be my student at the BMA. We had a long talk – he liked to talk – and he told me many things about our two leaders, but I couldn't share my actual views with him at that event.

I believe the army was far-sighted in not directly taking power at that point in time. They displayed their professionalism by keeping faith in the Constitution. So, on 11 January 2007, along with the rest of the country, I too heaved a sigh of relief. I was under the impression that the caretaker government would now hold a proper election.

But two days later, a new crisis presented itself. On one hand, a list of so-called corrupt officials was circulated without court verification and character assassination rose. On the other hand, arrests were being made without reason throughout the country and markets were evicted. Where was the election? Where was order? One after another came new political regulations, the foremost of which was "minus two." Khaleda Zia had been practicing a politics of corruption for five years but the first person to be arrested was Sheikh Hasina.

I had resigned from politics long ago. And I was getting old. It was time for others to take over. Still, as far as I could, I tried to uphold the ideals of democracy through my paper. But, just like with other businesses and papers, we were also pressured in different ways.

Ten days after 1/11, the Meena Bazaar in Dhanmondi was demolished. In a poor country where democracy was being threatened by corruption and hooliganism, it had apparently become necessary to destroy a business which provided jobs to many people simply because the building had no parking facility.

Every attempt to do something was faced with obstacles. Threats and fear were rampant. They almost literally took the property I had in Savar by force – a property I valued and that had been in my family since the sixties. They were going to set up a Chinese garments factory there.

I was finally forced to shut down *Ajker Kagoj* when faced with numerous problems. It was then I learned that both Nabil and I had been prohibted from traveling abroad.

By then, many businessman were in jail and several others had been listed as corrupt. Army officials had taken over the offices of many companies and bank accounts of many had been frozen. Many had been summoned to give an account of their property while others were named as accused in cases with the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Fortunately, I didn't have to experience any of these humiliating tortures at that time, not that no one tried to drag me through the mud. Some were so confident that I would suffer that they even published the news in the papers beforehand. In one of the leading dailies of the country, the following headline appeared:

“Accounts of Half of Kazi Shahid’s Family’s Property Summoned” – even though we had heard nothing to that effect. If the banks had got such an order, we would be the first to be notified. And the news did not appear anywhere else.

The next day, we heard that Kazi Faruque of PROSHIKA had been called to give an account of his family’s property. The editor of that leading daily was an old well-wisher. He too had been so confident about my corruption that as soon as he heard the name “Kazi,” he assumed the rest of the story. And it is these kinds of people who are known in society as non-partisan civilians.

Whatever happened to me is not unique – it happened with hundreds and hundreds of other businesses. But no matter how many problems I faced, at the back of my mind constantly was the thought of Sheikh Hasina in jail. I was worried about her safety. And the feeling extended to Khaleda Zia as well when she was arrested. The rise of terrorism during her rule was a source of great worry and dislike for me. In spite of this, I still considered the fact that crores of people had elected these two leaders to power at different times and this behavior towards them was inappropriate.

The situation was such that there wasn’t much I could do. Sheikh Hasina had summoned me about two days before she was arrested. Director of Square, Anjan Chowdhury Pintu, accompanied me. He was like a younger brother to me. When I come to think of it, I wonder if she had sensed something already. She, however, talked only about Abahani during our meeting, but I get the feeling still that she had called me to possibly convey a message to my student Moeen.

Regardless, I kept an eye out for how I could contact Moeen. But he was very busy at the time. I did, however, manage to meet him twice. He was busy then with arrests and identifications of leaders who were on the corruption list and so, I wasn’t really able to say anything to him. But I still kept my appointment with him. On 17 March 2008, General Moeen’s PS called me and said, “Sir, would you be able to manage some time to come in today? The Chief wants to talk to you, even if it’s for a few minutes.” I agreed.

Inam was sitting in front of me at the time. He understood what was going on. He said, “If you do meet him, just talk about the weather. Nothing else.”

I headed out and reached his office very quickly. It was almost one in the afternoon. Moeen received me very respectfully and pleasantly when I entered his office.

I said, “I really wanted to see you but consider this a childish behavior of mine. This is a side effect of my aging.”

After shaking hands, we sat on the sofa and I said now, “Colonel Salam brought me a picture from the Passing Out parade at the BMA. You, me, Mannaf, Jahir, Salam are all there with Bangabandhu. After Salam left me with that picture, I had an urge to see you. My cadet is a General today – the Chief of Staff. Shouldn’t I want to see him and his office? Shouldn’t we have a photograph taken of us together?”

We were both sentimental as we took a photo. After the photograph, I gradually brought up my real reason for being there. “Moeen, I’m getting old. Allow me to say a couple of things. I hope you will try to accept and follow through with them. Please do not impose martial law and try to hold the election within this year. The army has done what it needed to. That’s enough. Please release those two people.”

Moeen sat there, shocked by my request. I remained silent and apprehensive. I didn't know if I had gone too far and how he would react to it! After a brief silence, I resumed. I said, "Moeen, did anyone else, like the Chief Advisor, the generals, well-wishers, or politicians, bring this up with you already?"

He replied, "No. No one did."

Emphatically, I said, "Why then did I?"

His answer was direct: "Because you love me."

We both remained quiet now. Finally, unable to think of what else to say, I took my leave.

Moeen saw me to my car.

I felt pleased at having met Moeen. Colonel Salam called me up a little later.

"Sir, please be free on Friday night. Moeen and his wife, Nazneen, along with my wife and I, will come to have dinner with you."

I was still in my car. Exactly five minutes later, Salam called again. "Sir, we'll have the dinner on Saturday, the 22nd."

I said, "No problem."

This told me that my meeting today had gone very well. My heart, naturally, soared. When I reported this to my family, everyone was equally happy. On Saturday night, Moeen and Salam, along with their wives, came to my home. First, the six of us, including Ameenah sat together to converse. The subject of our stories ranged from the cadet college to the BMA.

Moeen spoke the most. He said, "No one will believe how we started our lives. We started from nothing. We had nothing. Our troops sat on the floor at the BMA to eat daal and bread. We had no mattresses or curtains."

It was nice to reminisce before we moved on to talking about our families. Nabil and the others arrived in the meantime. Anis and Juditha were in Panchagarh at the time. We ate and conversed until everyone left around 10.30 pm. Sixteen people had accompanied Moeen. Just before leaving, Moeen took me aside and said, "Sir, I thought about what you said. This country recognizes no other leader but those two women. But it will take me some time to do something about the situation. If my head still sits on my shoulders, I will ensure an election with the two leaders by December. No one can stop me. If they refuse, it is their problem. But the election will be held."

Nabil and Inam escorted Moeen, Naznee, Salam and Rekha downstairs. It was then that Moeen said to Nabil, "Call me if you need anything. Your father is like my father."

The next day, that is, 23 March, Sunday, I went to Dr. Modasser and reported the whole encounter, asking him to keep mum. But I asked him to meet Sheikh Hasina and convey the message to her.

Despite the adverse situation, my sons were revamping the Gemcon Group. After moving into the new building, they had sponsored a golf tournament as part of their social responsibility. The timing, incidentally, had been right.

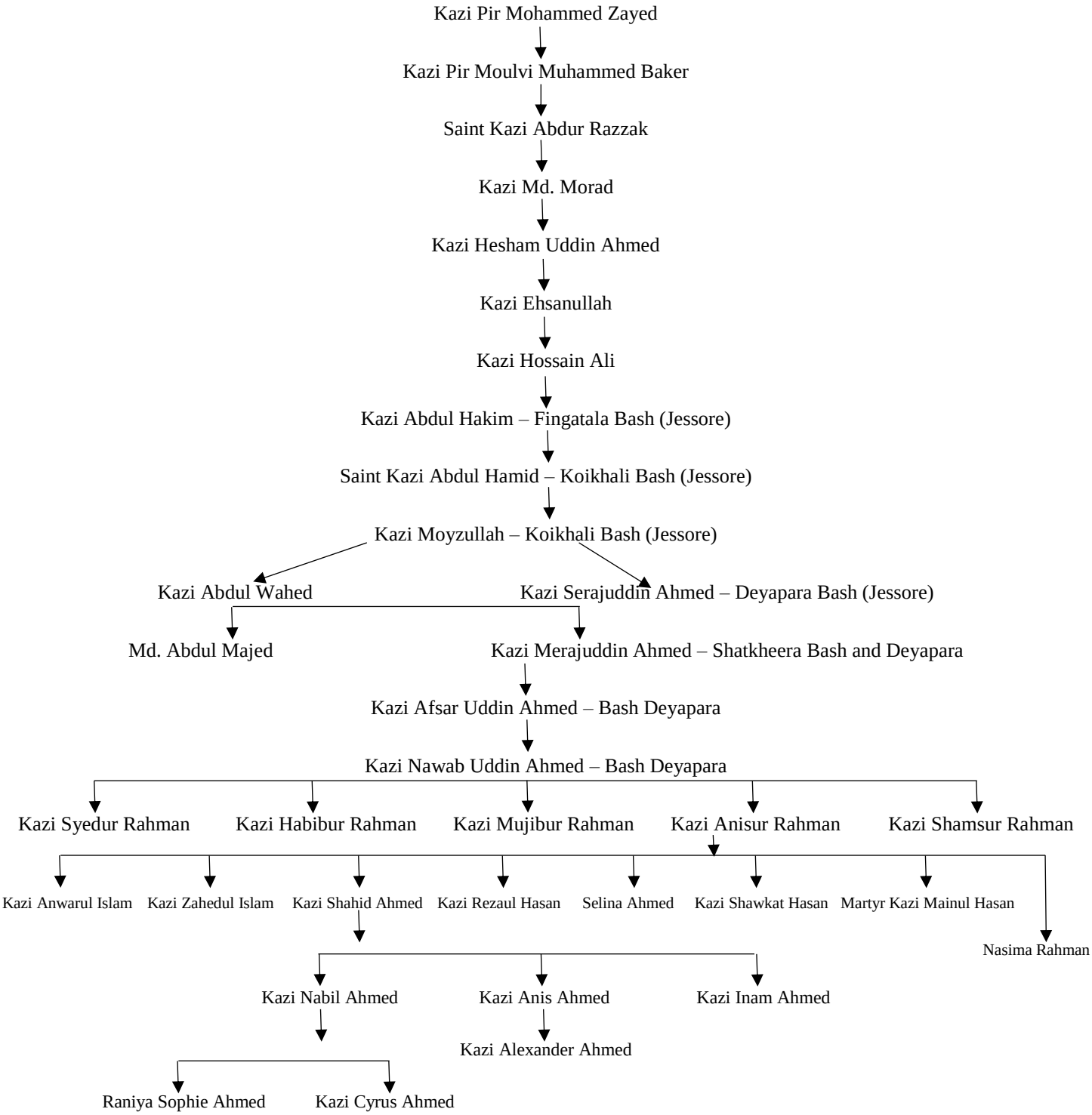
I don't know how big of a role my words alone played in all this, but the foreigners, who kept hammering the ideals of democracy into us, had supported the undemocratic government during 1/11, overlooking

issues of human and civic rights with support from the civilian owners of those NGOs that operated with their funds. So, General Moeen deserves much of the credit for bringing the nation out of a state of emergency and holding the election to reinstate democracy.

I know that many will disagree with me on this count. However, it falls to me to recount one or two of those moments in history that have been overlooked or ignored, but I have been, perhaps, coincidentally privy to.

After that election, five years, comprising some positive, some not so positive years, have passed by. The best gift I received in this time was the trial of the war criminals. The nation is going through another political crisis now but I strongly believe that if we adhere strictly to the ideals of the Liberation War, the people will overcome this. The nation will, one day, regain stability. The younger generation will make incredible progress, and this time around, they must take on the responsibility for it.

The Kazi Family Tree



Identities of Notable Characters in *Inscriptions in Stone*

1. Kazi Anisur Rahman: The writer's father
2. Kazi Nawab Uddin Ahmed: The writer's paternal grandfather
3. Mohammad Nurjalal Biswas Master: The writer's childhood friend
4. Malek Chacha (nickname Malu): The writer's father's paternal cousin
5. Sajeda: The writer's maternal grandmother
6. Syed Nurul Haque: Sajeda Nani's father
7. Kazi Golam Sobhan: The writer's maternal grandfather
8. Hasnu: The writer's younger sister
9. Belayet Munshi: Former Superintendant of the Jessore Collectorate
10. Khodaboksh, Kader, Bhanu, Bhanu's Ma, Akkas's Ma, Chchutu, Kalu, Asiya: Domestic servants at the writer's home in Jessore
11. Johur Headmaster: Headmaster of the writer's uncle's school
12. Kazi Rezaul Hasan (Mintu): The writer's younger brother
13. Monna, Faksha, Foni, Kencho, Asha, Monu, Kanakethe, Badshah, Inu, Lame Manik, Nuru, Khokon, Dulal, Nurjalal, Mahbub, Mizan, Motiyar, Shobha, Gora: The writer's childhood classmates
14. Pachu Doctor: When the writer would become ill as a child, this is the railroad doctor his father would take him to
15. Compounder Wadud: A well-reputed compounder from the writer's childhood in Jessore and a relative of the writer's
16. Sanyal Babu: Teacher at Jessore Zilla School. He lived in Chachra. He moved homes during the Partition and came to live on Park Street
17. Chapabu: The writer's paternal cousin, the sweet and beautiful daughter of Habib Chacha from Khadki
18. Abolakanta Majumdar: A culturally aware man, he used live in Jessore during the writer's childhood. He was a notable gentleman whose home the writer's father used to visit and where poetry recitations were held.
19. Jaglu: When the writer was in college, this boy contracted leprosy and was thrown out of his home. He wanted to sit for his exams, so the writer brought him into his own home, took care of him and helped him complete his studies.
20. Kazi Anwarul Islam: The writer's older brother
21. Captain Jamil: Army officer, later a Colonel; he was killed along with Bangabandhu
22. Mannan Bhai: Former Minister Major General Mannan Siddiqui
23. Jahangir Nasrullah: From Lahore. The writer came to know him at the Engineering University in West Pakistan. Later, he became a Lieutenant General in the Pakistan Army and an ENC.
24. Dr. Azgar Hamid: A very well-know head of department and one of the writer's teachers. His classmate was the Nobel laureate, Abdus Salam.
25. Mr. Qureshi: The writer's math teacher
26. Major Akhtar: A resident of Lahore from Mymensingh. He became a lifelong friend after the writer and several others went to visit his home. The others were Kamal, Brigadier Laskar, Brigadier Zaman, Bulu Bhai (Brigadier Salam), and General Mowla.
27. Major General Shamsuzzaman: He died recently
28. Rashid Khan: Son of Brigadier Sher Khan – Brig. Sher Khan was killed in an air crash.
29. Yasin Shaheb: Father of Ehsan from Pindi
30. Hajera Bhai, Kadam Bhai, Abu Bhai, Paru Bhai: Friends of the writer's who performed in plays together
31. Mosharraf Shaheb of Lahore: He became the Chairman of PetroBangla later on.
32. Governor Kalabagh: As the Governor of Pakistan, he was the Chancellor of Lahore Engineering when the writer was a student there.

33. Afridi: The writer's classmate in Lahore Engineering
34. Dr. Khilji Mahmud: The writer's teacher in Lahore
35. Mohammed Ikramullah: A civil scholar from Chittagong Cadet College who was studying with the writer
36. Brigadier Sabdaad: He was a member of the writer's ISSB interview board. His son, Akhter Daad, was the writer's friend. On 16 December 1971, his younger brother, Zahed, had said, "You, your Bhutto, and all of you are more terrible than Hitler."
37. General Shirin Dil Khan Niazi: He was the chairman of the writer's ISSB interview board. He was also the GOC of the 3rd Division in Murree.
38. Ruhul Quddus Shaheb: Jessore's DM or DC
39. Joarder Shaheb: Principal of the Jessore M M College
40. Rahman Shaheb: Mejho Bhai's father-in-law
41. Montu: The writer's grandfather from the next house
42. Togor: Son of Montu
43. Bholanath: He used to live in the haunted house in the garden in front of the writer's home
44. Johur: Son of Shanti Bhai who lived in the writer's childhood neighborhood. He used to work at PIA.
45. Shahenshah Pahlavi: The Shah of Iran
46. Farah Diba: The Shah's wife
47. Manzoor Shaheb: One of the five directors of The Engineers Limited
48. S R Khan Shaheb, Kashem Shaheb, Majid Shaheb: Directors of The Engineers Limited
49. Bashirul Haq: Lived in Lahore with the writer. Architect of "Thariani"
50. Mustafa Sarwar: A long-time worker of the Bangladesh Awami League and one-time Cultural Editor
51. Dilshad: The writer's batman when he joined the army in Pakistan
52. Major Imtiaz Azim: He was in the same 12th Division in Murree with the writer
53. Lieutenant Mazhar: Posted to Muzaffarabad with the writer in Azad Kashmir
54. Major Shukur: The writer's Commanding Officer at Muzaffarabad
55. General Atiqur Rahman: Adjutant General, Pakistan Army
56. Kamal: Childhood friend of the writer's and currently the owner of Concord
57. Adjutant Captain Mumtaz: The writer's Adjutant Captain during his YO5 course
58. Brigadier Malik: He was at the headquarters of the 21st Brigade. He was a handsome, evergreen officer called Brigadier Malik, a member of the SSG and a pilot. Later, he became the GOC of the 11th Division
59. Khaleq: A well-known contractor
60. Lt. Mohsin: Stationed at Kasur with the writer
61. Major Janjua: The writer's Commanding Officer in Lahore
62. Ameenah: The writer's wife
63. Dr. Shamsuddin: Studied medicine with the writer's wife; a freedom fighter
64. Nabil: The writer's oldest son
65. Shajubu, Juthibu, Chapabu, Bokulbu, Bulubu, Jyotsna, and Jharna: Paternal cousins of the writer
66. Major Jalil: Directing staff of the JTC course in Quetta. He retired as a lieutenant colonel.
67. Ameerah: Ameenah's younger sister
68. Professor Munir: Chief Instructor at the Military Engineering College in Risalpur
69. Faruk Iqbal: He was in Engineering at the Military College
70. Captain Mujib: A Bangali instructor at the MCE
71. Lt. General Akram: The writer's student at Risalpur and currently the VC of Pakistan Engineering University
72. Mashiur Rahman Chacha and Raushan Ali Chacha: Long-time Awami League leaders in Jessore
73. Major Mozammel: Later became a Major General. Deceased.

74. Major Ziauddin: Joined in the Liberation War by escaping Pakistan through Shialkot with Major Manzoor in 1971
75. Major Lodi: Well-known as a killer in 1971. Later came to the 3 Engineers' Battalion
76. Major Muktadir: He later became a Major General in the Bangladesh Army
77. Captain Sayeed: A doctor and husband of Ikramullah's sister
78. Brigadier Khaled Musharrof: He was murdered on 7 November 1975
79. Brigadier Manzoor: Brigade Commander of the Bangladesh Army in Jessore
80. Brigade Commander Huda: He was murdered in Chittagong on 7 November 1975
81. Major Anwar: He later became a Major General in the Bangladesh Army
82. Colonel Mannaf: He later became a Major General in the Bangladesh Army. Deceased.
83. Major Mahbub: Freedom fighter; nephew of Brigadier Manzoor. Attempted to murder General Zia in Chittagong and killed while he was fleeing
84. Writer Zubaida Khanom: Mother of Colonel Mannaf
85. Obaidul: The writer's batman at the BMA
86. Jahed Latif: A brigadier in the Bangladesh Army, a good friend of the writer's
87. Admiral M H Khan: Former Navy Chief
88. Mansoor Shaheb: Former President of the Abahani Club
89. ARM Enamul Huq: Ameenah's father and the writer's father-in-law
90. P H Huckin or Hugh Huckin: MD of Welldreill
91. Brigadier Munim: Inspired the writer to establish his pole factory. He became a Major General later. Deceased.
92. Kretschmar: A German who had come to train local employees of Gemcon on pole manufacturing
93. poet Shamsur Rahman, Dr. Kazi Shahidul Alam, Dr. Shamsul Huda Harun, Dr. Rafiqul Islam, Dr. Razib Humayun, Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Dr. Nilima Ibrahim, Shah A M S Kibria, Justice Debesh Chandra Bhattacharya, Dr. Durgadas Bhattacharya, Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, poet Begum Sufia Kamal, Principal Ahad Chowdhury, Major Nasir Uddin, Khandakar Mazharul Karim, Swapan Kumar Sarker, Selina Akhtar Jahan, Ratan Tanu Ghosh, Shamsul Arefin, Md. Abdul Malek, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Siddiqur Rahman, Asaduzzaman Asad, Barrister Amirul Islam, Abdul Awwal (Maulana), Akbar Qureshi, A T M Shamsul Haque, Mustafa Sarwar, Ataur Rahman, M Mohiuddin, Lutfor Rahman Riton, Nikhil Chakraborty, Jibon Chowdhury, Alhaj Syed Abul Hossain, Dr. Syed Modasser Ali, Syed Shamsul Huq, Brig. Anwarul Azim Mollick, Colonel Abu Osman Chowdhury, Abdul Matin Chowdhury, Subrata Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan Chowdhury of the Muktijoddha Shangsad, Shahriar Kabir, Professor Panna Kaiser, Kalim Sharafi, Fakir Alamgir, Ziauddin Tarek, Kazi Nabil Ahmed, Abdul Matin Khan, Mohammed Ashrab Ali, Md. Lutfor Rahman, Md. Hossain, Sudhir Kumar Robi, S K Biswas, Khondoker Shahinul Haque, Iqbal Hossain Patwary, Md. Abul Kashem, Abu Sayeed Betar, Shah Mozammel Huq, etc.: They were all associated with the writer or with *Kagoj*.
94. General Moeen: Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff from 2007-2008 and the writer's former student at the BMA.

Picture Captions and Blurbs of *Inscriptions in Stone* by Kazi Shahid Ahed

Translated by Arifa Ghani Rahman

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19	The author with his mother
20	The author at just 8 years old
21	The author in Class 8
22	The author's father with his two paternal uncles (1946)
23	The author as Second Lieutenant (1966)
24	The author with his extended family in Jessore (1970)
25	The author as Adjutant in Murree, Pakistan
26	The author, just before a tennis game in Murree, Pakistan
27 (2 pics)	The author with his domesticated deer in Jessore The author at Bell Tower, Murree. This was sent to his wife Ameenah before their wedding.
28 (2 pics)	The author (middle) with his two younger brothers The author at his *Gaye Halud* program on 31 December 1968 in Jessore
29	The author offering sharbat to his wife Ameenah at their wedding on 2 January 1969
30	The author with his father-in-law, A R M Enamul Huq, and wife Ameenah in Peshawar (1970)
31	The author's oldest son, Kazi Nabil Ahmed, in their Volkswagen (1971)
32	Captain Kazi Shahid with his oldest son, Kazi Nabil Ahmed
33	Major Faruk Iqbal and his wife, Rahila, with the author and his wife Ameenah in Risalpur, Pakistan
34	The author with Brigadier Kamal Laskar and Major Ikramullah in Risalpur, Pakistan
35	The author with his friends at the Murree Badia Prison Camp (1972)
36	The author at Comilla Cantonment (1975)
37	The author's second son, Kazi Anis Ahmed, inspired by the Passing Out parade at the Bangladesh Military Academy on 11 January 1975
38	The author with the graduating officers and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Passing Out parade of the Bangladesh Military Academy on 11 January 1975
39	The author with his wife and two sons, Kazi Nabil Ahmed and Kazi Anis Ahmed, in front of the Naval Headquarters (1979)
40 (2 pics)	The author and his wife with the current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina (1994)

	The author with the current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and other political leaders (1995)
41 (2 pics)	The author exchanging greetings with Begum Khaleda Zia The author with the erstwhile President Shahabuddin
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45	The author's oldest son, Kazi Nabil Ahmed
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48	The author in his office with his three sons. From left to right: Kazi Nabil Ahmed, Kazi Anis Ahmed, and Kazi Inam Ahmed

Front inner cover blurb

In Bangladesh, the genre of the autobiography has largely remained confined to accounts by writers or politicians. Hence, *Inscriptions in Stone* by Kazi Shahid Ahmed, the former Army Officer, newspaper editor and publisher, and business magnate, is rather unique. This book, where the author has candidly spoken about his life through the British, Pakistani, and Bangladesh periods, is highly significant for a number of reasons.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed is literally a workhorse. The number of organizations he has established in one lifetime is unimaginable. In this autobiography, he has described his professional and personal life in simple, lucid, and direct prose. His descriptions of his experiences are not just a personal history, they present to readers a picture of this region from the forties in the 20th century to the early decades of the 21st century. The forties were an eventful era: the Second World War, famine, and the Partition served to damage and divide this region. With that as background, he describes his childhood in very touching terms. His student and work life in East and West Pakistan after the Partition are detailed enough to create a picture for us.

He is an expert at character development and plot narration. The eye-witness accounts of many incidents help to give life to his descriptions. Readers also get a deep understanding of the Punjabis, Pathans, and other ethnicities from his narration of his life as an army officer in the Pakistani Army. From the Liberation War in 1971 until his retirement, the author describes every detail of the unbearable lives led by the Bengali soldiers in the Pakistan Army, the officers, and their families.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed has portrayed both his profession and his family with deep affection within the pages of this book.

Back inner cover blurb

Kazi Shahid Ahmed was born in 1940 in Jessore. After graduating with an engineering degree, he spent fourteen years in the army. He served as one of the Platoon Commanders at the inception of the Bangladesh Military Academy. In 1979, he went into business and also became the publisher of the dailies *Khoborer Kagoj* and *Ajker Kagoj*. He is the first person to establish an organic tea garden in Bangladesh. His non-profit endeavors include the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and the Kazi Shahid Foundation.

Kazi Shahid Ahmed's autobiography, *Jiboner Shilalipi* (*Inscriptions in Stone*), was first published in February 2014. Other books by the author include *Ghore Aagun Legeche* (First edition: 1995; Second edition: Ekushey Boimela 2002) and *Amar Lekha* (First edition: 1995; Second edition: Ekushey Boimela 2002). At the age of 73, his first novel, *Bhoirob*, was published in April 2013; its third edition was published in December 2013. In addition, the author's second and third novels as well as an English translation of *Bhoirob* are in the pipeline.

About the Translator

Arifa Ghani Rahman is Associate Professor of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. She also teaches online at Rivier University in New Hampshire, USA, from Bangladesh. In addition, Arifa freelances as an editor and translator, with translations of several short stories, a book of poetry and a novel to her credit. She is also the Executive Editor of *Crossings*, the ULAB Journal of English Studies. Arifa likes to boast that she has spent approximately each decade of her life on a different continent.